HOLLOW FACES, MERCILESS MOONS

FICTION BY *William Scott Home*
ART BY *Stephen E. Fabian*

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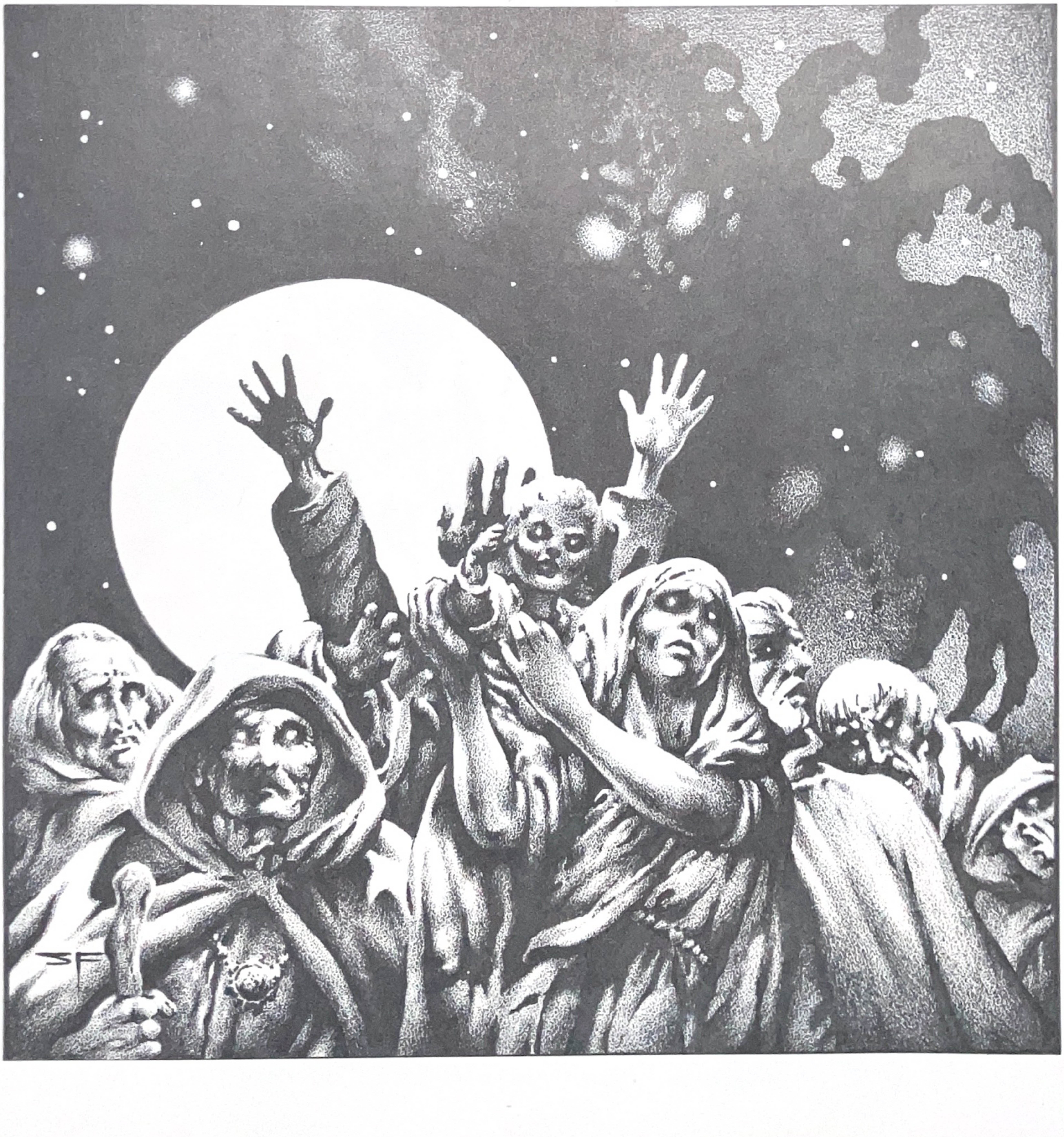
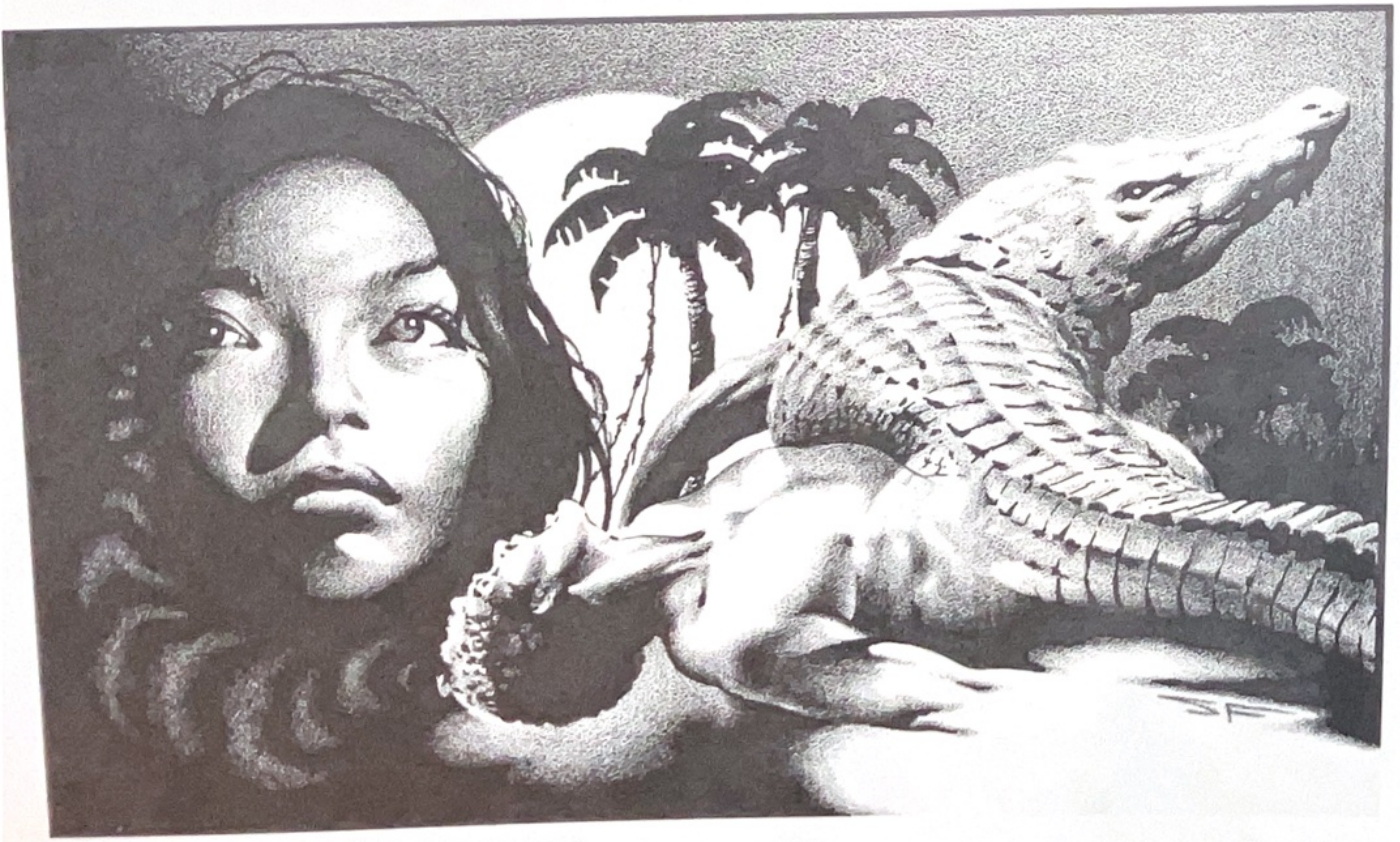


CONTENTS

THE UTTER DARK WHERE BLIND WHITE SEA SNAKES CRAWL 4
THE UNCOMFORTABLE WORDS 8
THE SILVER JUDGMENT ECHOING 11
ACID SOUL AND SULPHUROUS SWEAT 20
THE LAST GOLEM 26
THE LAMPS ARE LIGHTED IN THE HOUSE OF HIDES 31
THE PARASITE 41
WHAT BREEDS ABOUT HER HEART 45
SHIP OF GHOULS 48
CHAMELEON THAT BLINKS BARBED STARS 57
A COBWEB OF PULSING VEINS 91



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HOLLOW FACES, MERCILESS MOONS

fiction by William Scott Home

art by Stephen E. Fabian

Dedicated to the memory of August Derleth,
for his many kindnesses

> "Beauty is a terrible and an awful thing.
> Terrible, because it never has and never can be fathomed; God sets us nothing but riddles.
> Within beauty, both shores meet, all contradictions exist side by side.
> The most dreadful thing is that beauty is not terrifying alone, but profoundly mysterious. God and the Devil are fighting in there. . ."
>
> --Dostoevskii

> "People speak of eternity as if it were immense - infinite!
> But what if eternity is only a little dirty closet full of spiders?"
>
> --Dostoevskii

HOLLOW FACES, MERCILESS MOONS is a WEIRDBOOK special issue. It has been published in an edition of about 1200 copies, approximately 20% of which are bound in hard covers. The prices for these editions are: $15 each for the hard cover version, $5 each for the self-cover version. For information on current availability, trade discounts for dealers, etc., write to: WEIRDBOOK, P O Box 35, Amherst Branch, Buffalo, New York 14226.

The Utter Dark
Where Blind White Sea Snakes Crawl

The first impression of decay--- or hasty genesis--- which the old Carib town of Stann Creek imparts to its visitors is quickly overtaken by a bland sensory honey compounded of the overwhelming sunlight, an exuberance of blossoms---hibiscus all year, jasmine and oleander seasonally---and the aleatory rhythm of feet and heads, rumbling trucks and padding waves. The creek itself, bridged at the centre of town, would pass without notice if it were not a rim to rim bed of water-hyacinths; from the exclusive huddle of paintless houses green fields mediate with the sea, mangrove, and spongy fabric of rain forest which softens the startling karst of the Stann Creek Valley.

Still, visitors do not come to see the town, nondescript as any in British Honduras, but its inhabitants, and so are disappointed, since the people have no distinct appearance, dress, or (despite the occasional mask) expression from people anywhere else in the country; and the resonant taradiddle of vowels rippling like undaunted flowers from unexpected doorways and windows is to inattentive listeners scarcely less unintelligible than the smoothed edges of the dialects which serve for English and Spanish in general practice.

Evidence for devil-worship (as the first missionaries described the persisting rites of their indigenous religion), scowling witch doctors, a cluster of drunken family dead, a scrabbling corpus of demon familiars unborn in anatomy or myth, and the scorpion hatred which they supposedly entertain even more for Creoles than whites, can not be found. Books and sensationalists failing the test, the half-informed tourist shortly wanders elsewhere for fresher disappointments.

Meanwhile the Caribs persevere in pumping the lungs of their disintegrating culture, which has survived superfluous servings of fire and sword to beat now like a netted bird in the diffident mesh of the machine. Its character slowly erodes from the town, watched by the old with concern, by the young--- paper-insulated from their own language--- with fatalistic detachment. Slowly the clotted heat of Amazonian jungles, the sharp pylons of the Windward Islands' cliffs, even the iridescent laminae of Africa, fade from an atmosphere which was once the invisible fortress of this private world. I stepped off the bus into what was fast becoming a commonplace street.

As it was still early I walked over to the hospital. Dr. Arzu greeted me with, "But you missed a big lodge! Must have been worthwhile; I've been patching them up ever since. Father Aranda's wife was the first one in, about two in the morning. Hit her head on a rafter while she was possessed. No fracture, fortunately. You got the impellor?"

"And everything else I need, and with any luck I'll be ready to start again day after tomorrow."

"You're a brave man. Please don't invite me aboard. Just a minute--- "

A girl with a small sickly baby had been sitting in his office and rose to go, her face taut with suppressed conflict.

"What I want to do," he was telling her, "is to arrange some tests. I think it's a hereditary condition--- we call it an enzyme pathway blockage--- and if I can find out specifically which one, I think I can handle it. In the meantime you keep up the feeding and the supplements just the way I've been telling you."

She parted her lips but her acknowledgement was not audible; doubt had gelled her eyes. The baby was truly pitifully shrunken, and mewled in her arm as she went out.

"Radiance Valentine," he explained. "Her first. Anaemia, I thought, but she's been doing what I've told her and it just gets weaker. It's some genetic defect--- though she comes from a healthy family--- but I can't guess which one and I doubt I'll be able to find out. But when they're that age, and it's the first, it's a hard thing to face; you have to keep hope alive."

"How would you interpret the silence then?"

"No problem about that. This is her fifth visit to me, so now she's going to Malamaya. That won't do any damage. Carib buyay are not the potion-pushers or fetish-rattlers you find other places; she won't touch the baby. It might not be any better if she says what I think she will--- because obviously Radiance is worried about the belzing-bug, which attacks the first-born. But the slimy excrescence it leaves in the corners--- you see I know a few of the tricks--- and the telltale scorings in the yard haven't been found; I got that out of her without being too obvious. The main thing is that she doesn't want any of the neighbors to get that idea, either, or she'd be coventrated in an hour, and the rest of her family too. For their sake, I hope--- God forgive me --- that Malamaya will find another culprit."

"Forgive what? I thought all diseases were caused by malicious ancestors."

"Trouble is that all this started a couple of weeks ago in January, when all the dead were on their annual leave to Esquipulas--- they vacation again in Holy Week--- and weren't available for any mischief. It's the case of the Quaker who told the burglar, 'Not for all the world would I harm thee, but thou standest where I am about to shoot.' If the blame has to be cast it must fall somewhere, even in the zone of innocence."

"A flying aspersion never maimed anybody yet."

"You think not, heh? Nobody in Stann Creek doubts that Malamaya was responsible for Sanchez's death. They found him charred to a cinder in sheets which were unscorched, but soaked through with plasma. You can quiet adults by the mention of her name, much less children. Intimation of her malice could quiet them for good. Just a flash of light in the evening--- she travels in an eggshell."

"In that case it might be socially hygienic to try to persuade her that it was some outside agency altogether."

"There are no outside agencies where Caribs are concerned."

"Nothing so conventional as a vampire?"

"Aha, now you've shifted back to my competence. I've seen several children attacked by vampires--- not here in Stann Creek, of course, but from the Maya villages. Like mosquitos, and maybe for the same reason--- you're the man to check out something like that --- they zero in on the same people time and again, just like the Stoker variety. I saw a little girl up in San Antonio whose arms and legs were crusted with the black diareses of infected bites, while nobody else in the house had been touched. Ours aren't rabid, yet, but the bite isn't harmless.

"No, a vampire is nothing spectral here, its signature readily recognised. Isn't it true that there are no vampire bats in the Old World?"

"True indeed. There are false vampires in Africa and South Asia which evidently drink the blood from their avian and mammalian victims, but then eat the flesh; I suspect they are the evolutionary or at least ethological forebears of the Neotropical's true vampires. Ours carry such innocuous Linnaean names as *Desmodus* and *Diphylla* because the more appropriate--- *Vampyrum*, *Vampyrodes*, *Vampyressa*--- were used up on impostors as fast as they were discovered in the frantic belief that they represented the long-feared prototype, the name carried down from the bleak snowy mountains of central Europe which never knew a one of them."

"That's a favorite thesis of mine--- that you never find a fear existing alongside its actual template. Few people shudder at what they can see and touch. While these hot mite-ridden parasites flutter before the faces of their sleeping victims---who if waking merely brush them away---someone across the world shivers in the expectation of their impossible onslaught."

"The same person asleep and awake is on opposite sides of the world."

"But so is his whole physical environment. I agree that horror is a real thing, an independent agency that will find some avenue to express itself. I just say that nature in its infinite perversity supplies some kind of realisation for every dread the mind can brew, but without matching them in the same time and place. Familiarity lays it where it lives; our unsatisfied minds keep stretching our qualms into more grotesque torsos, susceptible only to the unexpected, the unforeseen. Helps keep us on our toes, I guess..."

"I wonder if *fear* isn't an alternate answer to the famous riddle *gáiuru bai, gasaminaru, buguia, lábugie* (the faster you get rid of it, the more you realise you are its puppet)--- you sound as if some such undreamt-of beast cropped up in a recent nightmare."

Arzu sat back, lit a cigarillo, and stared out at sea. "Look out there. Beautiful, casual, even-pulsed--- I look seaward whenever I want to relax, to stop thinking in dissonances; it's lacquered like a morpho's wing. Watch those sticky sharkfin swells snorkel in on the sand, toothlessly. Eternal recurrence. Peace. The end of seeking. The centre of the ocean is wherever you look, just like life."

"That's the surface. You, especially, plumbing it with that preposterous egg of yours, know what's underneath. To you those placid wrinkles are the rind of darkness. Swarms of incredible creatures whose beauty decreases in direct proportion to the intensity of light, misshapen archetypes of the most fundamental urges, nuzzling through the ooze on ghoulish or vampiric errand--- the whole shadowy depth a cauldron of tearing and snapping, deception and insidious depth. There's no hate, no fear --- just the steady aggregation of pursuit and ruin. None of this registers on the surface which is passing peace along to me. But you never think of the surface, do you? You're an aficionado of the deeps, you agree with my brutal description--- with or without Captain Ray's monster."

"That slippery surface to me, then, is what the lavish sunlight that frosts Stann Creek is to you. Oh, I love the place, I know all its virtues; but if people here--- myself included --- sometimes think of life as locked crescents of clawing and ripping in which random destruction lurches its incurable course, it's because that's just the way it is. And that's a horror. But don't look for hints on the surface."

"You think Radiance will come back to you?"

"If Malamaya fails her... and she can't find anybody else."

Two days later I had finished the repairs on the sub-sub and was ready for a trial run. Passing as always by the hospital to notify Arzu--- for insurance--- I was waved directly into the emergency room while he was treating a patient.

Entering, I hesitated queasily. Arzu was painting iodine on the lips of an elderly woman, whose lumpy squinted features were rather blank. Both upper and lower lips had been cut into, quite neatly, but they were already purulent. When her mouth was closed the wound was a perfect ellipse, as though someone under the inspiration of Hugo had driven a biscuit-punch clean through her flesh.

A younger woman stood by her, hand on her shoulder and concern on her face. His restrained tone with her was mildly critical: "... good thing you didn't wait longer; always happens when they live alone. Until this heals, you must keep her with you. I want to see it again in a few days."

He saw me as he turned for the bandage and nodded. Compassion in him had somehow survived the gamut of applied id invocation. The younger woman helped the older one up and began leading her away.

Washing his hands, he sighed, lips tight. "Can you imagine anyone doing a thing like that? The old woman lives alone and the niece didn't find her until this morning. Roaches were already massed on the wound. She thinks it's an accident but I can't see how. The old woman is in a poor state--- helplessly out of her mind a long time--- so we won't get any particulars from her, and the niece rushed off without looking around. Reporting to the Inspector is just a formality..."

"So you're off to the utter dark, eh? Down into the writhings of the coiled deep?"

"Just a quick run-around in the bogue to test everything out."

"I'll be looking for you this evening, then."

With the garish picture of that sadistically inflicted boring in my mind I thought of the upcoming voyage as less an infernal descent than a drop into a quiet and uncontorted realm where that hydra evil that somehow adapts itself to the upright ape is barred, perhaps because, like a plant, it nurses on the sun.

I was impatient to get away, in no mood to wait for whatever time my hand Goldbourne Valentine would choose to meet me at the sub. I went to his house.

I recognised the pleasant girl sitting on the veranda, baby in her lap noisily sucking its bottle. She was humming *Do ha nani* but her eyes were rather red.

"So you're Goldbourne's sister? How's the baby?"

"'E just fine," she answered with an instant and very pretty smile. "Just fine for true. He sleep good last night and only eat good this morning."

Better than she did, clearly. "Sounds good; I hope it lasts. You ought to tell Dr. Arzu."

"'E definitely going last, and Dr. Arzu going know."

Goldbourne came out half-dressed, gearless, and yawning. He faced me with a mild, gritty-eyed irritation intended mostly for the sun, his constitutional good humour still stretching inside.

"Looks like you spent a hard night cutting grass."

"No grass no do grow here. I coming right now."

I was a little surprised by the tired girl's complacency and as soon as Goldbourne was ready and we moved away, I told him, "Your sister really shouldn't go without the doctor for the baby, you know."

"No worry about that." There was no hesitation in his voice. "If he need he again we going, but the whole thing fix up."

"Malamaya knew the answer, eh?" He was just surprised enough to laugh, and seeing it half guessed didn't hesitate with the rest. Anyway, it was forcing itself out.

"Malamaya tell Radiance for watch the baby all night, put he into the moonlight where she can see--- she give her one bracelet for keep the pickney safe from the moon--- and keep alongside her, halfway from the window to the pickney, one pair of scissors and one candle. Radiance and I done share the watching, but Radiance she so anxious she keep up most of the time.

"I awake though when it happen. I m' hear Radiance suck in she breath. One small black thread come creep in over the windowsill and run upon the floor, pour right through the window longer and longer, one lee thread act like one worm. Finally 'e climb the leg of the lee bed and twist right over upon the pickney. I hold my breath--- believe me I frighten---but Radiance make like wowla and she hung in wait. The thread crawl upon the baby belly and gone to he navel. Definitely the thing jut 'e navel, 'e gone in. Radiance take the scissors and snip the thread in half right where it pass she,

after 'e pierce the pickney. She never have time for light the candle for burn it with because the rest of the thread done jerk right back out the window, but what left upon the floor--- 'e just curl up like one dead worm and fall out the baby belly--- and she done burn that much. But anyway, when thing happen the way the woman say 'e going happen, I figure thing going better if she say 'e going better."

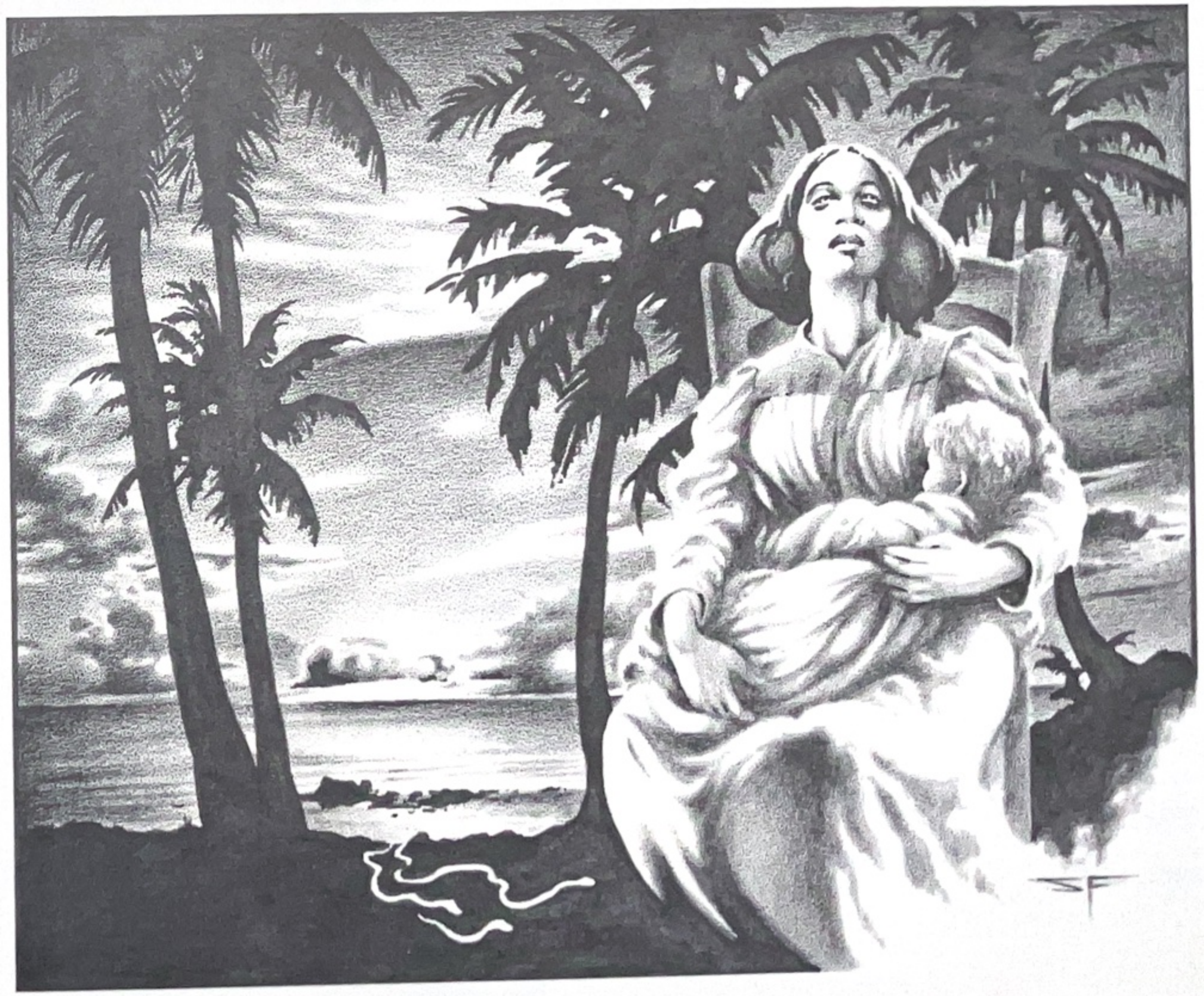
"Did you go outside right away to see what it was?"

It was a laugh of surprise again. "You only do joke, no true?"

We were standing next to a solitary shack still locked up, although it was mid-morning. He looked at it significantly. Halfway down the cross street we could see the old lady with the bandaged mouth being helped tediously up the steps of another house by her niece.

Goldbourne looked at the odd patch on her mouth, and stage-whispered to me, "Man, that only a rough ẹu, no?" cutting his eyes to see if I really understood. The niece reared back in surprised shock; the impassive woman trudged upward.

There we stood, in a festering well as rich with light as an eagle's perch, but light soured, with a taupe stain to it. I was anxious to get down to the smudgy purity of life-cycles undistracted by the unconceived, the tottering balance of right and evil--- a darkness which was itself, not clabbered out of the sun.



The Uncomfortable Words

Miss Smitt and Mrs. McKey were sitting together on the bench, knees touching and pupils fused, when the passing of a coarse-featured man in a white jacket a short distance behind them broke into their words; then, as sunlight closed over the interruption, they resumed, in soft whispering approaches, the terrible burden of their existence.

"In the field behind the wall that's tumbled down," Miss Smitt was saying, "the field that's so overgrown with brambles, well, right by the wall is this Oriental-looking thing, some kind of dome, all tarnished and peeling, just supported by these four stone pillars and no walls, with a marble floor below it. The one in black---black robes all over, even his face--- was sitting there again, under the dome. The weeds were all trampled down in front of him. You should have seen the people standing around! Their flesh was peeled back from their bones like celery sticks. But right in front of the dome, by the fire, was some young man I hadn't seen before, and they were heating those enormous long pins, or needles, or whatever. They cut his feet off at the ankles, very slowly; I don't know how long it took--the knives must have been awfully dull. Goodness--- his strugglings and howlings went on and on, but finally they got them off and threw them on the fire, and each of the two needles were taken out smoking and were hammered up the open ends of the bones, straight up the legs. After a while they heated some more and started sawing off his hands, and repeated the whole thing all over, and then cut off his shins above the knees, and hammered in some more, and then his arms above the elbows, and so on--- my dear, such blasts of black smoke at every blow, and such a smell..."

Mrs McKey's face did not change except for the split-second appearance of her tongue along the line of her cracked lips. The desperate changelessness of her face made any misinterpretation of the movement impossible.

Miss Smitt, an Easter lily of a woman wrapped in black, relaxed, safe in a cell of unassailable calm. Her face ought to have been called expressionless, since that placid smile which is associated with (if so rarely found in) old age was never usurped. Mrs. McKey, however, deserved the adjective in its more usual application.

"It's incredible--- it's --- something you can scarcely believe even hearing about," she finally managed, fidgeting off the straitjacket of immobility in which the other woman's voice had laced her. Her words might have suggested a disbelief too modest or dubious to be defiant, but Miss Smitt betrayed no offence. "But how --- how did it end?"

"Oh, just as you would expect," Miss Smitt dismissed the whole matter, "since they burned all the pieces finally, even the head and chest. But just this Sunday, do you know, out in that same part, back where the mud is so bad behind the sheds--- remember, I told you?--- there was the girl--- I told you about her, didn't I? been there some time, the one with the red hair and freckled nose?--- well, she was cornered, and a man I hadn't seen before threw burning gasoline across her face. She fell against that fence, and it's so weak, you know, it collapsed right under her, so she fell there and lay twitching and writhing like a half-squashed spider while the gasoline burned her face off. It didn't catch the rest of her, because it was burning when he threw it, but she wasn't quiet until night was over." The initial clause of her last sentence was charged with the reassurance with which the better sort of gossips like to end distasteful recitals. Her smile floated like a swan before Mrs. McKey's terribly intent face, whose purposeless mouth only adjusted itself.

"The red-haired girl?" she gasped. "The one that looked so much like Dr. Jourdan's wife? Horrible! Just like when he killed her--- I was so shocked--- "

Cluck, from Miss Smitt. "I can imagine. I never knew them, but I know how you loved Mrs. Jourdan. I'll believe the girl looks like her. It was the same one, you know, just a week ago or so, who came running through, my dear, screaming her throat out, with a huge gash across her stomach and her entrails flying out behind her--- "

"*Running?*" Mrs. McKey was again guilty of incredulity.

"*Running!*" Miss Smitt was capable of mild emphasis. "Wobbly and half-drunken, you would have said, crashing from wall to fence, but running all the same, with this great green loop lolloping around her knees as she went. Someone was chasing her, of course, but I didn't see who--- "

Mrs. McKey's lips again required moisture, but got little. She was dressed shapelessly in grey, the only touch of colour a wilted sprig of honeysuckle on her lapel. Though years younger than Miss Smitt her colourless face seemed to be lined with superior age, probably because of the flaking, crowsfooted eyes which never seemed to fasten on anything except Miss Smitt's. Mrs. McKey never knew what to do with her mouth, or her hands, while Miss Smitt sat with her own white hands folded in her ample lap, in comfortable harmony with the quiet air and the satiny grass.

"About Dr. Jourdan's wife--- " Mrs. McKey started feebly, but could not get further. Miss Smitt had long since laid down gravel paths of conversation for the raking of Mrs. McKey's feet, and the green pastures were clearly marked "No Trespassing," so that Mrs. McKey, too shy to expose either her love or hate to the world, was unable to exert her meagre will even to the raising of an independent use for her exhalation.

The traffic beyond the spiky fence was briefly audible, and roused Miss Smitt. "Racing motors," she turned again. "Friday night I heard the motors racing and roaring and had to go up the hill to see what was going on--- the hill that's crisscrossed with all the rough gravel roads--- though none of them go anywhere. Well, there was one car which was roaring up and down these steep grades, spitting gravel right and left, and this man was dragging along behind it tied to a rope. He was face down in the gravel and the car was going at a terrific speed, but he was still struggling, Beverley, and grasping at the rope, and do you know he actually got his hands on it --- I suppose it wasn't really going so fast, after all, or he would never have got any grip at all --- but anyway, he did catch on, and pulled himself up to the back of the car even while it was speeding over that gravel road. But when he reached the back and was near enough to grab it he reached out and there was a terrible blue spark between his hand and the metal. His whole body stiffened and of course fell back on the gravel. Then he came to, I suppose, since he began scrabbling all over again.-- "

"And never got to the car?" Mrs. McKey was vitally concerned.

"No, dear, that was the funny thing," Miss Smitt was, by contrast, simply diverting her friend. "He honestly managed to work his way up to the car three or four times--- even though by then he was unrecognisable, even as a human being, Beverley--- but he got that terrible shock every time he touched the car, and fell back every time. Finally he just went limp and bounced along like a bundle of rags."

Mrs. McKey, webbed in Miss Smitt's quiet voice, had crushed her honeysuckle boutonniere. She allowed herself a quick wild survey of the gravel drives around the grounds, and came back to Miss Smitt's face without a word.

"You should have seen the demonstration yesterday, though, Beverley, out in the main park. Someone who must once have been a topiary expert took the flesh off people in all sorts of funny little shapes. Then the one that I thought was probably a doctor took one of the new boys and --- as he put it --- 'transfigured him into a woman' --- "

"In the name of God, Miss Smitt," Mrs. McKey shrilled, "I don't know how you stand it!"

"Pshaw;" Miss Smitt adhered rigidly to all the conventions of her age. "You should have seen me last night, Beverley. I couldn't sleep, you know, and woke up once in the night because of those groanings and moanings, and loud cracklings, like potato chips. The bed was a mess of roaches so I got up and what do you think I saw?" No answer was given or expected. "Right there on the floor of my own room (you know how sharp and rough it is) was this huge muscular man writhing and turning, and, Beverley, he was just seething with worms, like Herod. In the dimness you could see little patches of his body getting dark as the worms struggled out and then growing lighter as they bored in, like chiaroscuro all over his body."

For the first time Mrs. McKey's eyes left Miss Smitt's and may have focussed on something in the distance.

"But those crackling noises were deafening. Right around the room, against the walls, were those skull-headed things or whatever, the ones that look like skeletons but with their dry skin stretched out over them and all the pieces and organs tied on---remember, I've told you--- and they were sitting around eating each other; one pair of fangs were fastened on the shoulder of another while its head gobbled up the hand of the first--- all the way around. Smoke was pouring in the window because the people with those big rocks tied to them were being pushed down into the sulphur vats outside. Heh!"

Miss Smitt was clearly a woman with strength equal to her burdens.

Mrs. McKey jumped convulsively as a hand touched her shoulder. A man with thin grey hair, clearly pleased to find her settled down with her friend, had come up quietly.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. McKey. I'm very sorry to interrupt, but I think it's time for our talk now," he began, and turning politely to her partner, "haven't we met before, Miss--- ?"

"Smitt," she supplied, dropping her cold powder-puff hand into his.

"Well, Miss Smitt, I do hope you will excuse me, and I know Mrs. McKey will be very sorry, but as things are I have to keep a rather tight schedule---"

Miss Smitt smiled that she understood, collected her purse and rose carefully. The doctor offered an arm, but she was still independent, if slow. "Quite well, thank you, doctor," she said. "Bye-bye, Beverley, see you next week or so."

Mrs. McKey responded in monotone, and Miss Smitt walked slowly down the path to the gate. The doctor touched Mrs. McKey's shoulder again--- she did not jump this time--- and they turned into the building. At the door Mrs. McKey turned her head, saw Miss Smitt's parting wave from the gate, responded with a flop of the arm. The doctor, smiling, waved in a tight compass.

In the office Mrs. McKey sat down without invitation. Her file was already open on the doctor's desk, and he glanced over the latest reports, his smile, less secure than Miss Smitt's, becoming a little creased at the edges. "Make yourself comfortable, Mrs. McKey," he said absently; she crossed her legs and folded her arms tightly over her chest.

The doctor felt the momentary vertigo of helplessness which always staggered him at the beginning of these interviews. Anyway he was not suited for this assignment, being, unlike most of his profession, not only less than omniscient, but uncomfortable resting on the madness of others.

"Still the insomnia--- screaming all night," he reviewed briefly; "sleep only in early morning---incurable nightmares and heightened tension--- natural from sleep loss, of course. Seemed better a while ago... Still not reading." Mrs. McKey had been a linguist, and he had agreed to her request for a copy of Dante in the original before finding out that she simply wanted to check the spelling of the quotation she kept writing all over the walls. When he discovered it was the wrong line he took the book back.

"About all I can claim to have done," he mused, reflecting on that episode, "---besides making her forget her crime--- is that she's come to behave normally in front of the one visitor whose arrival a couple of months ago sent her into screaming hysterics."

He looked up blankly. "I certainly was sorry to disturb your conversation with Miss Smitt," he said evenly. "I'm sure you enjoy her visits very much."

No answer.

"She is a relative of yours?"

"No. She used to live near me before."

"You have a lot in common, then?"

"We do now."

Dull, dutiful answers. The doctor quickened.

"She is kind enough to come fairly often, I'm glad to see. You find a lot to talk about?"

Mrs. McKey's face did not change. He waited expectantly, then verbalised his appeal.

"What do you talk about, mostly?"

"The things that happen to her during the week."

"Does it -- ah -- make you homesick?"

"Not homesick. Just sick."

The red light flashed in the doctor's forehead.

"You mean--- it brings up painful memories?"

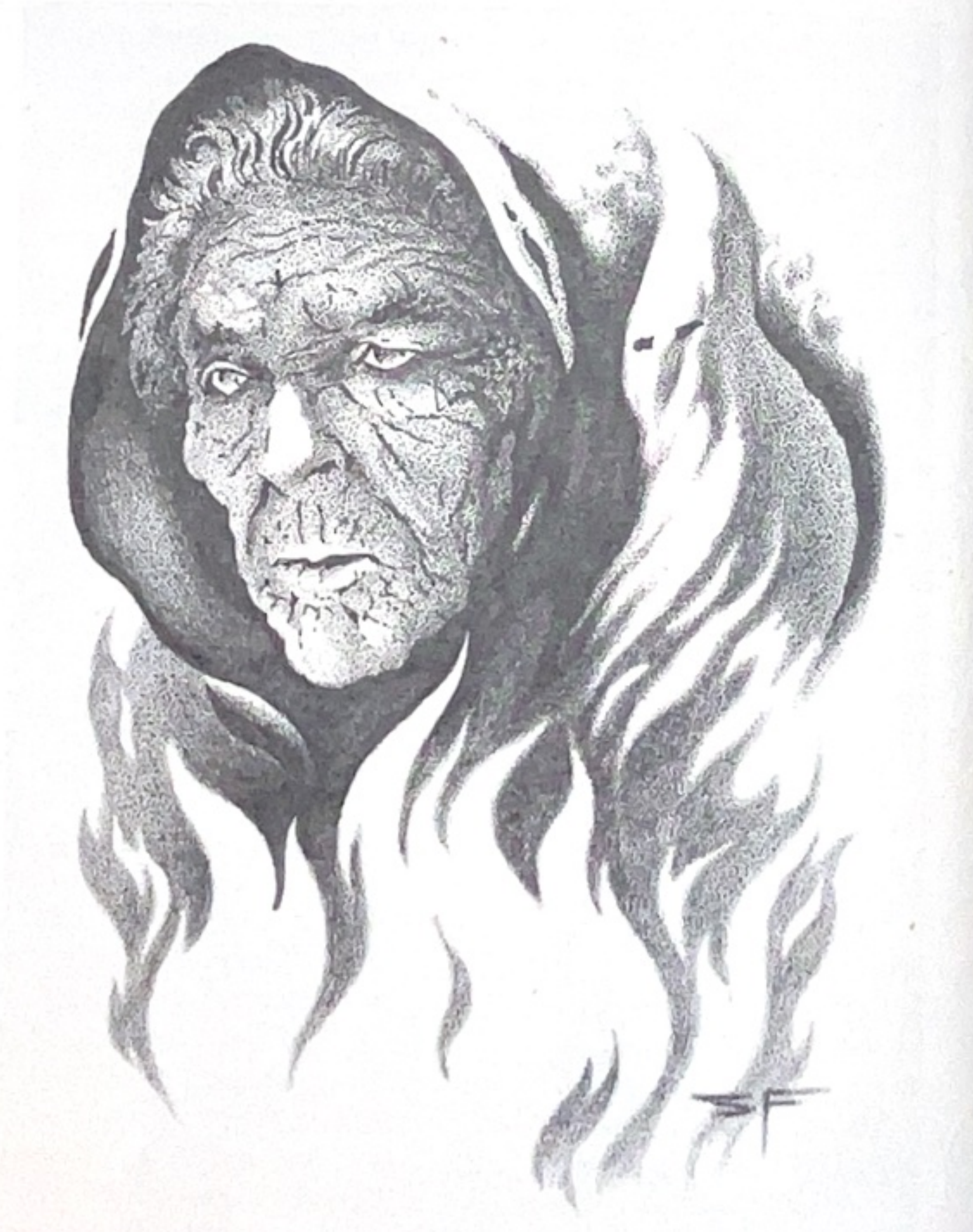
"No. We talk about when I get out."

"But surely that's what you look forward to?" His voice was intensely concerned.

Mrs. McKey, sitting quite still, turned on him silently the yawning, immortal forlornness that haunts the eyes of the insane.

Miss Smitt was not a woman to dally; no one would have doubted that she was going straight home. She passed through the gate, leaving the evening slant of the sun on the grass behind her, and fluttered a pasty hand to the gate attendant. He nodded, and she started up the dusty road which rose away from the town.

The attendant had often meant to ask where she lived, because he thought the two or three houses along that road were empty, and he knew it ended in the cemetery.



The Silver Judgment Echoing

When we climb into the trees in readiness for the watch, the horror of the coming night, I think how odd it is we should be most afraid in darkness, especially when there is no moon: our fear is a function of light and light alone, oncoming or returned. The night-world, normally an inversion of our own--- colour subsumed to chiaroscuro, dark images advancing and the pale retiring, detail less diagnostic than dimension--- and this limy mist that follows us now even the obverse of clear air --- should evert our familiar fears to comforts. But it does not. By necessity we had to stop moving at night, take up refuge, and it was then more than otherwise that we met our ends--- not in daylight; perhaps because of greater caution. To absolute darkness then is some unfathomable light. In the mornings we avoided counting, avoided looking at each other (an ingrained habit now), but knew somehow, every few days, that we were one fewer, that our flight---if not soon finished--- was ultimately in vain. I thought of suggesting --- half-daring to look into the others' faces --- that once we came among buildings again we should leave on the lights all night--- just to imagine the horror that would dilate their eyes and mouths at the thought of abolishing the darkness! Light was our enemy--- light high or low, light thrust or bowed, but light--- not darkness.

We never slept on those long nights. I do not know how long it had been since any of us really slept; what passed in the wordless rat-like plodding (quadrupedal at least in mind) through the daylit snowscape passed for sleep. Whisperings in the branches lit our trembling always (there was no question we would be truly helpless before a concerted rush, an ambush); our phosphorescent prints led directly to us from as far as our flight (and their search) began, spelled out our progress to every watcher from the moon on down, and that nacreous flood of mist, bearing plankton of the unknown in to gnaw our insensate hands and bathe our eyes in lye, hid us from nothing but our own desire for confirmation.

But in the morning we climbed down like a horde of giant cockroaches, quivering like rain-prodded petals, doubled over with cold, hunger, fear, and hopelessness. Of course if we did not feel we could somehow escape or outlast the threat we would not have moved at all, but that optimism was organic, as rigid and icy in us as the prisms that glittered in the needles before us, playing the role of thought or bone. Many more nights under such harsh nearby stars would diminish us no less quickly of themselves; perhaps it was reasonable to fear the night, too.

The unpenetrating sun this morning promised only the ghost of a day--- a safe day, a usable day--- just one step removed from the pantomime reality of night. Each step exploded roach-like in an arctic panegyric; except for that rattling discharge from the crust moving through these two reduced dimensions was like free fall in rock crystal, solid and vapour equally substantial.

Somehow this morning we felt ourselves reduced by one, and went through the usual ritual in response--- ignoring all of the others and any signs of numbers (never, never looking at the previous evening's tracks), felt the pulse in the earth, of the lumpy dead branches in their snowy sleeves to make sure they were not now roots seeking sustenance from the curdled air, grasping even the most subtly oriented signals for what comfort they might offer. Lichen medallions, the horrible punctilios of fallen frost whose tooth-deep patterns spelled something meaningful but boustrephedon, the pennies minted by melt-drops on the mud, were all ambivalent as the smile of a waiting carnivore. But we all gloated always on the dullness and opacity of stone.

Then, as always, without any conference, we began walking positively in the most virgin direction. It was too obvious that there were not many of us now. Fear of separation vied with our fear of rustlings, tapping branches, sudden unplaceable breezes; came, in fact, to loom as large as our fear of each other.

Whenever we could, of course, we avoided the snow patches altogether, if there were some line of free access, however long a roundabout it meant, and went on elated vaguely over a point made. Much of the water we crossed was too crowded or too quick--- or too solid--- to be any danger, though we always cleared carefully any pools or pondings we suspected rather than saw. The notion that there might be some in a coming glen or sink added some of the strength we couldn't eat now, putting us back to zero in our chart of progress: but it was too frequent, in woods of this sort, hummocky and scarp-ridden, to spur us much.

Supposedly one of our party knew the way a and was seemingly still with us. Nobody questioned him as far as landmarks went; what we questioned (and that constantly) was his sense of direction (thereby his *identity*), his likelihood of turning steadily to one hand or the other. None of the rest of us could have judged how genuine was the track he followed. It was deserted, and so desirous. We listened furtively to each other to see who might tend left when the word was "right!," who might look back instead of forward--- it was important to reinforce the sense of memory, which got so little exercise in its own right now.

When we came to the edge of the trees, with a more parklike stretch ahead of us, and could even make out a small grey point, the first house in days (stark in the white landscape as the trepan in a skull) we of course paused, each looking around in the compass he was allowed without trespassing on his fellows' bodies, and the general whisper, "Well?" annoyed the leaves which clung soggily to our feet. We all felt the open spaces were much safer. You could see any approach from a distance, and they gave no harbergage to rustles or sudden sighs.

But it seemed our track lay straight ahead, in any case, and we started moving, demanding now the nearness of the others as much as we feared it.

Fifty feet short of the building we stopped Our cautionary glances lashed it so many times I was surprised they did not burn their streaks in blackly. All the windows were broken, always the best sign, but in many ways the house seemed remarkably intact. I felt more hesitation than I had expected; still, I was on the end of our line, had to edge out from the others, motioning--- across from me someone did the same (how hard it is to be opposite a man and not look at his face!) --- and, keeping a good distance, we moved around the house.

Facing the side meant, of course, looking through a window. The horror of that--- breaching any opening not previously sounded --- was one I had not felt for many days; its accumulated strength baulked me now.

I had to, of course; the other one hung back. The windows were few and too dark to show whether I might see him if I peered. Some trees still overshadowed the building, which was only one storey; creeping through them I looked finally into what had been the kitchen. There were no signs of any food in the cupboard I could see; their doors hung open, and the furnishings were covered with dust. The light was dim, and only when I moved away did some snippets of shadow remembered from the gloom begin to take significant shape, in memory. I went back and frowned in again, into a well of dubiety from which I drew so much thirst.

There was a dusty table littered with pans, candles, gardening tools; in one of the pans--- on the long-cold stove--- was a dusty hump which still displayed the maliciously capable wrinkles and knuckles of that tepid cupful of greyish jelly, the brain--- unmistakably of human size. Near it in another pan lay a heart. Though I could not actually see any water around these organs, they seemed (for all the dust) to be less stale or shrunken than they should.

But a new terror plucked my brows and armpits--- unless it was my own innate nervousness I was certain that, relative to the stillness inside, there was a faint mobility to the dust, a slight regular oscillation--- as if the heart still quivered, somehow---influenced if dying, sending a slight wash of dust up the side of the pan.

I ran back but did not need to stumble for my words. The others were already on the way, giving two outbuildings as wide a berth. There certainly must have been water. There was a well in back, but the ice was heavy on its base.

And not long after we came over the ridge to a long gradual slope and saw a drastic expanse of water, bat-black on white silence, stretching out below and away from us in unfrozen potency. So fresh from one panic, this almost undid us. We ran back and forth frantically searching for a narrower or broken channel and finally found one several miles upstream, where the deep flow was too broken, and we could cross. (To spite the long clear track we left in the snow we always swung through the shallow gulleys on dropping branches, breaking the continuity of our spoor--- only in illusion.)

"Got to put a lot of miles between that and us today"--- the litany of the flight. At least we got a chilling drink, taken in haste and with shut eyes, and the water stayed with us squelching in what was left of our boots, threatening to weld us right down to the earth we had to keep treadmilling (our feet were too long numb to notice the difference), a reminder of the risk we had run, were still running, lived running. But the snow then gave out in large checquers, and the masses of leaves we crossed were soggy and damp, rebounding after our steps like a sponge, and that was something gained.

Like any quarry we felt a new security whenever we found new cover, and the fear or knowledge that it would flee or vapourise. Because of our steps backward at the glassy river we were bound to be less cautious about small obstacles, and when I collided with the man ahead we were both too thunderstruck to take in the menace in front of us at once.

The trees were scattered clumps now, but some were still free-standing. At the foot of one of these lay a human body, fallen forward as if from sleep--- but sprawled at the unquestionable angle of death.

From corpses certainly we had nothing to fear: why did the others tremble? Vitality had become for them a too exotic thing. I was ready to go on when the first indicated by signals (right hand, yes!) a covered alternate--- a long, exhausting detour back in the shelter of the remaining trees, through shrubs and hedgerows, in order to avoid passing close by the body, or however distantly in sight of the face.

"The tricks they'll go to!" someone breathed out when we finished. The others nodded glumly. Only I had not suspected it might be a trick--- which meant--- and a glimpse of the face is enough! So we thought ... It was true; I thought of that avulsed heart beating in its pan and had a spasm in my throat.

"Should we put up a cross to warn anybody coming the other way?" somebody rasped--- not thinking, dangerously not thinking. He was shushed in passing.

We came across two more safe houses; all the signs of riot and desertion were there. But both of them had been emptied. Those had been wisest who, forewarned, knowing the topography of their own houses, had crept around in the dark and done their work with stones, shovels, mud, and dust, and then gathered up their food and gone away; those most foolish who, too timid to run any risks, simply left their houses for the woods. We operated on the assumption that you did not have to be near a house at the time if it was still operable, leaking; and *we* survived.

So in these sealed houses we searched from top to bottom but were hardly surprised to find nothing, except stores already open, licked, eaten, mouse-mined; from top to bottom we found all windows broken, mirrors smashed, the polished metal of tray and edgings scraped, muddied, painted, smeared, or rusted over.

But no one corrected surfaces painted white. Perhaps something had been missed there...

As was all too probable, after two of those hope-lifters we came through a grove of woods and saw the third rearing up ahead of us intact, windows glistening like fresh scabs, a car in the liver-dimness of its shed clothed only in dust--- a watchtower of horror, venomous and total. Not only did this spur us on but ruled out our using either of the other houses as a refuge that night. I did not feel there was any thought of returning to the trees --- however diluted the legibility of our trail--- because it seemed that we had exhausted all their possibilities, and there were few trees now ahead...

There was a long dreary tract to cross before we came to the next. It seemed to be an outpost. It had been treated thoroughly: not only were the windows smashed, but the very walls were broken into (as if someone had vainly sought the narrowest and most inaccessible refuge, perhaps at the very last, or, more hopefully, had only voided every speck of mica in the bricks)--- but, miraculous to tell, two badly rusted tins of food (rusted now of course, not when they were abandoned; they were in the soggy grass outside)--- and even a flaccid cabbage and a heel of bacon in a low cupboard in the storehouse out back. All the pantry food had been eaten down to the crumbs: the bacon told us there were no mice.

The labels' words were comforting as darkness, if illegible, for they were unmistakably our own. Since the whole exterior was rusted it was possible to get out the food by cutting through an end, pulling open the top against the wall and smearing it immediately with soot, pouring the food out and scooping the tins at once through the fire grate, then stomping on them filled and burning them at once.

We got wax beans and peas. They forced us through the ordeal of making a numbering: there were five shares to be handed out now.

Chewing, I got again the strength and cheek to wonder: had we not been so careful, how would it have happened? Would a vapour or twitching amorphous jelly have fizzed out, or dissociated members exploding from a deep-sea leak have piled up to assemble or reassemble on the spot? Whatever remained inside had been pregnant with brilliance, colour, and decay, had infinite possibilities, the wholeness of things and nothing--- could best the most byzantine of our fears.

We wandered through the house, nervous in the failing light (irony! skeletal laughter!) and decided it would make as good a shelter as any. There were some of the more terrible signs to deal with, though. A flatiron had been dropped to the floor and burned itself a Gothic hearth; the ironing board was flung splintered against the wall. A basket of laundry half way up the staircase had been lodged in the banister, the clothes trailing desolately down the steps, moribund now with the wind. It must be horrible for those who are inside at the time... and those outside? They at least leave no monograms ...

And for us? We never thought about that. To try to collect your thoughts was to risk the possibility that no memory was there: that was the first death. I envy those who hunt and seek instead of flying, knowing that between their frustration and chagrin and our unbridled terror there is the gulf of worlds. They, oriented to the future, are immune to memories. To us, oriented to the moment, finding ourselves desolate of them was to doubt which we were, where we stood--- even though we could not acknowledge those we had. All our fears rode in two front pockets, our pleasures in our bowels.

That distinction, that much of ourselves, was at least a challenge to their cunning: their advantage over us is ours over them. But as our constant diminution shows, it is no stalemate. Yet our weakness, our unstygian heel, remained unsearchable.

Automatically I sorted through the clothes, checking the buttons' positions, the seams, the pockets, careful for any design, any imprint, that might be there. They were all sound enough.

"Well? What do you think?" Anxiety visible, face averted.

In the rooms upstairs were mouldering mattresses, which could be hauled away from the windows, out of the mist. I did not want to stay inside a house at all: there were too many untreated leaks, overlooked possibilities. Even books might have fatal pictures! The attic certainly was shut, with no sign of recent entry; that, of course, meant danger even if no one on our side opened it....

Had I been alone would I have walked on through the safe darkness? No. I was exhausted. I joined the others, getting busy by a shared thought at knotting the laundry together with the flatiron and other kitchenware into a sort of blind-man trap at the top of the steps, only a noisemaker really, which would alert us to, but hardly entangle, any oncomers.

"Noise. That's all the trees were really good for--- wasn't it?" Nobody agreed. They hadn't been good for much. I noticed nobody chose or volunteered to sleep near the head of the stairs, either.

With food in our bellies and some softness and warmth beneath us we might have settled to a quick slumber; but we didn't. It was the first time, in fact, that no one wondered aloud, "For all we know, mayn't they go back in the night?" so that everyone else could hiss him loudly and someone else groan just within hearing, "But that's always when somebody falls away...." Somehow these obvious words had to be spoken, expelled. It was obscene, but no one at least was so gross as to broach, "How long have we been wandering?" or "How many of us were there to start with?" even while we all lay awake there for hours hounding just those questions. I knew we were never all asleep at the same time or even at all, and wondered how it was I could remember dreams in the morning when I never recalled a moment my eyes were not studying the weird discontinuous knots and waves in the unpainted boards above me.

I have been a victim of many dreams in my life, none of them more compulsive or disturbing than those repeated plays of bridges. Regularly over my years, from infant vertigo to adult apprehension, bridges have reared up within my dreams and flung me a challenge too often beyond my capacity. The horror they suggested was that my meeting their contest successfully would end in my destruction. The bridges were always impossible to cross--- I know I never made it over any of them. I had no sense really of the swirling depths below--- river, canyon, ocean, abyss--- but simply of the grinding need to cling to the bridges, to go forward, always frustrated by the surreal structure of the bridges themselves. Enormous gaps yawned between the boards. Railings, those sneers at human weakness, never bothered to rise at all. Sometimes there was simply a series of unconnected trestles without plates, no wider than an ordinary plank, it being necessary to leap from one to the other. Being wooden they were always slick or slippery (rot takes the same due whether water is above or below); often the spans themselves were broken or downcurved in the centre, giving no level spot on which to stand and no assurance that they might not crack with the slightest added weight. And there was no possibility of swinging beneath--- some weakness or projecting point saw to that--- and progress companied with the horror of reaching a certain distance and being able to go no further, then turning to the return, perhaps an easy one to then, and finding that route too falling away, or simply never having been there, every moment owning its own universe and these often as unbound as those challenging and dwindling trestles. Sometimes I knew of others, friends perhaps, back on the side I had left, but I never had any feelings--- fear, curiosity, awareness of seduction--- about the far side. After all, I never got there.

Now the bridges of my dreams are all complete, the far sides readily accessible. *That* is the horror. The old horror, the fear of not being able simply to cling to my bridge, however crazy its alignment or weak its accordance with great laws--- that was a statement of being, a reflection of the facts of time or of my position in the spatial moment. My problem now was to turn back from, escape, those eternally open, unflawed bridges.

The old dreams used to drain me so much that I woke up exhausted, unable to flex in the real, bridgeless world. But there was nothing ultimate about them. They passed. Going now enervate and embattled into sleep I should have expected nothing but refreshment--- were not my dreams too reversed?--- but of course, it didn't come.

But then the blacks and whites of earth were changed and all antipathies wore a different mask. At least it seemed so: I doubted, myself, that we had ever been looking at things correctly in the first place. What a light into the caverns of men's thoughts, that the colour white, which is no colour at all but the spectrum compressed--- the cool of the blue, the violence of the red, the secrecy of the green--- should be associated with purity, sanctity, and eternity! White, the colour of picked bones, maggots, funerary stones, mould and fungi, pus and ooze. Black, which is no colour--- no stress, no illusion--- is of the night and of the void, the kingdom of sleep, the processes of the flesh; renewer of strength, incubator of dreams (which are colourless), matrix of philosophies and engineer of iridescence. It alone unlocked the sealed gates of wonder. The many breeds of blackness conjoined put together the kingdoms of matter and life, cloak all battling beings with the oblivion which is the purest state of being.

The essence of night, pulling the seas' soft cover across insomniac continents, urging flesh over unquiet flesh, marionetting the night-walkers who speed away uncleanliness, duels the maddening moon, disguises the heavens' redness. In moonshadow any object may have any shape, none more definitive than the rest: thought, too, waxes plastic, mutable. Day breeds dust, harshness, sucks out the shadow-figures which decorate imperfect things, reduce images to their stark unwelcome bones.

God even made glass black; when He made glass He made obsidian; He made it innocent. Only man debases it, whores it out to light, suborns it to the masks of the esoteric. Passing light without delaying or diluting it, taking not a minim of its essence, glass can be filled with all the beauty or the horror of all being and retain none of it--- but impose, broadcast, communicate it, all without losing its own integrity. If only I could do as much --- reflect and reject every delusion hurled at me and keep in a heart of darkness all crafts my own--- be born opaque as obsidian (and strong as silver), impenetrable to the violent and stupendous works the world kept herding down on me. These kept accreting in and weakening my fracture zones, those dikes actinic octopi of nerves created weeding through my substance like a mould; ultimately their alien force and joining should suffice to shatter me.

Silver is prostituted only; glass which, unattended, wards light off the face of darkness damns us. For all their grim potential, God knotted up chrome and silver, platinum and iron, in rocks with dirty faces, hidden eyes! We had everted them, hauled out their delicate membranes and viscera taut and tortured, made them serve and multiply our whims, our shallow geometries. And they never failed to fling back every parable we animated! This revolt they serviced was nothing new, but only more serious, more successful, than the long-standing one we had ignored.

But the plea of ignorance, however inadmissable in the high courts of cold winds and dark-faced judges, justifies every man to himself; and self-justified we fled, avoided the writs of judgment. So we thought...

As usual the next morning we moved up and out quickly avoiding eyes, faces, touch; yet as soon as we were strung out on the road we began at once to cohere, lemming-like, our swelling, deflating clustre a yawing catacombs of spirits, trying to reassure ourselves by half-seen gestures, half-remembered rhythms--- and of course we failed, as always, could not repress the side glances, stumbled on missing one or another of the meaningless ruts and chuckholes of the road.

There was a road here; we began running into cars in fact, most run off the road and into the banks, their doors standing open. The tanks of these were empty and some perhaps showed signs of attack, but most had been treated adequately, and after circling the first few we grew more confident about staying on the road. Someone had been before us, but not so many (perhaps) that we might not eventually find some resuscitable motor.

No one had said it, but we all seemed to assume that somewhere ahead of us was a wide dry region, without snow and with only covered wells, where were only rude huts which would never have offered any of the horrible opportunities of real houses--- where there had never been many people and where we might be able to hole up indefinitely. Merely to be able to rest for a time (assuming we did not starve in the process) seemed all the utopia we could desire, and we ignored the fact that our fears would soon descend into each other's bodies. We never questioned whether this thing we fled were finite, as, if it were not, our very being was inverted.

A small village began lurching toward us. There were tufts of green grass in the street, shadows and mists digesting the houses they had devoured (the sun fortunately had allotted us another clabberyday); mud, dust, and grime everywhere, not much of it intentionally placed. The silence of those decrepit stores and houses was too eloquent. They were suitably broken over, but wherever men had been was always the threat of quiet water, jagged glass, burnished metal!

Of course the houses were all ransacked, but instinct forbade us to ignore them completely, and we did forage some tittles of dried fruit and vegetables which we swallowed at once. Boiling of course had been forcibly abandoned, though it was probably harmless; we could only roast, bake when we could rig a firepit, and of course had forsworn tea and coffee, chocolate and milk; perhaps it was not needful, but we survived, didn't we? --- so ---

More importantly, we found a few sooted tins of petrol behind one secured house, and our leader (perhaps) found a car which still fired off when prodded. It was dusty and court-plastered, had all the glass and mirrors broken, but was not otherwise damaged: a god-send. (I wondered why it had been left, but not aloud.) For so minor an accommodation as this the others looked as if they had passed through that gate which lifts all burdens. Our fears were leavened with opium.

But at my suggestion we checked it thoroughly. It had been tinkered with before; everything under the bonnet had been disfigured enough. The rattle once started was unsettling, and we were forced to trade tyres with some of the other, more disabled cars, but in no time at all more miles were stacking up behind us in an hour than we could beat in two days of aimless walking. The wind of course blew in fiercely through the gaping windows, but we were inured to more chills than this; at least our feet were well pensioned off. We took turns driving, resting and thawing ourselves frequently, so went on by the jolts and squeals the variable skills of our weakened team dispensed. But each note of healthy individuality restored our faith in our group's integrity.

We stopped again at a cluster of houses and syphoned some petrol for the last time before the chill-drilling stars came to challenge us. We had to chock stones at the cars from a distance, for they had been left open, and we had to secure our rear; then saw some houses off to the side that looked unabandoned. It was too much to risk, approaching them, and we hurried on at a pitch of anxiety which the added miles only partly soothed.

We did not have to slow down in darkness. Though the lamps were of course shattered there was a glimmer of sorts to the road, and the ground had flattened out. The worst part wound through a deep forest (another druidical army to be outsmarted) where we had to slow repeatedly to avoid colliding with cars or even buildings where the road spread, narrowed, grew indistinct. There was the occasional frightful smell of languid water, and at times the moon threatened clear through the clouds. The road was malicious to the spirits --- navigable, but winding; each curve was thickly overhung with heavy needles, and whatever lay beyond waited for disclosure at the last headlong moment.

I could feel an urge to be secure growing in all of us --- defended not against the night's cold nor its silence but its utterly impotent *self* --- that irrational fear again. Perhaps it was an instinct, which was valid, though its origin was not apparent. Reason told me we were best off moving, discrete, welcoming each new vista we turned without mishap. But the panoramic changes of unknown nighted country raised qualms, and we heeded qualms; the only antidote was rest.

After a silent hour or two of trees once more thinning and the road running straight, we came to a paved fan, a spacious turn-off leading to several commercial buildings suitably stoned and smudged. One was a massive, well-built pile in front of which our driver eased to a halt.

"Five storeys at least," he said, questioning.

The building's high outline was black and impersonal. We made a loose aimless cast around of heads which served the instinct of face-reading.

"Don't you think we have enough petrol for the rest of the night?"

"Does it matter? Have to sleep sometime. Good a place as any --- maybe ---"

I had still in my mouth the tang of the risk I took only the day before; sat firm, and someone else finally had to say, without the slightest inflection of confidence, "Well --- I'll have a look. Has to be done."

We all got out of the car and stood statueque in the tomb-faint light. There was no sound other than the car's drying heat crinkling. But when I pushed up against the wall which fenced the front of the building I shook with terror: one of my dreams had come to life. There was a deep ditch suggesting a moat, quite wide, fifteen feet perhaps, and nothing coming up from the bottom, no gurgling or other sign of moving water. There was no bridge! Only an opening in the wall, and then a drop, though an elevated step faced us from the silent broken door of the hostelry; and one on our side matched it.

The volunteer stepped bravely on the raised block and was moved forward suddenly, silently, carried across and set evenly in place on the far side. Too startled to move he saved his balance (no railing of course went with him) but closed his eyes (not daring the ditch--- but would closed eyes save us?) and fumbled in his pockets at the doorway as if for a match. Then he went on in to darkness. I felt sure there would be leaks of skylight through broken panes.

Chilled, we waited for long minutes, constantly interrogating the surrounding darkness. Certainly there would not be any electricity left. Would he dare any light? I thought again about suggesting that we turn all the lights on and leave them --- spotlight every separate crease and pore in our faces--- but it was not funny, here and now, to imagine how

they would react.

After a time we moved suspiciously, anxiously, back into the car and stared steadily at the building, automatically locking the doors and barring the windows with upraised arms, and shivered --- wandering hands testing the locks every few seconds, feeling over the jagged window edges to pick out the last shards of glass. It was ferociously cold now, and the thought of riding again into the polar air shook us...

Suddenly the door burst open and we heard his rattling footsteps, saw him come into view outside the entrance shadow. He reached the further wall and jumped heavily on the block, but the proximal that moved him had evidently slipped back to its original position. There was no return over the open gap. He stood stupidly --- or stupefied --- on the distal block, stamping his feet frenetically, even --- a dead sign now --- waving his arms. His eyes glazed.

"For God's sake, get on!" we all shouted together, and the motor choked harshly to life and spit gravel from the tyres as we clawed at seats and frame. In moments we were rocketing maniacally down the road, the spectre of the abandoned companion --- if it had been he --- sitting with us, gibbering.

If he could run even so short a distance, survive even so briefly, was there still some hope? None of us really knew how it happened, and took any straw as a good omen. That it was not death I knew; that it might be better I did not. (Sometimes in the late hours of night-watches I tried to imagine that the whole coup might be quite pleasant, might translate us to a happy realm --- in order to convince myself that I was still a fool, still bore that critical watermark of humanity.) Normally, in so legend-maggotted a land, prophecies precede the prodigy, and prepare. Here they were blank. We almost never found corpses, and those we did seemed the truly, the enviably, dead. (Perhaps even that in that aspect was a trap...)

Perhaps it came as a wave front of wasp-stings prairie-firing through the quick of one's being --- each and every atom of oneself being branded with a hot iron. Perhaps each organ of the personality, ossified or liquescent, was mined out, spoonful by spoonful, by jagged silver splinters. Perhaps in some arachnid way those counter-qualities were injected, in our torsos, to sizzle away their templates until belly, legs, and skull rolled sac-like, amoeboid, and the ichor was drawn away through a pinhole in space, or diffused perhaps down to interlayer all the stones and ice and fires of the world. Or perhaps that meeting continued to a true fusion, a doubling-up of mass in volume, so that the body so much increased in weight sank slowly through oozing soil to ferment its leadenness with little pops of voidings where the galls and cadavers of long night press. Even a shadow could lift up, drink in, fall flat (sated? grown?) and go on liberated... it was curious we had never thought to fear our shadows. Were they the spies? The heels? As our only wholly lightless part they were of course our one token of impregnability...

Once I had taught a pair of identical twins (ah! that was a memory! I could not be one of them after all) and was haunted by the thought of what it must be like to live in a world with a mirror moving beside you all your days, raising your limbs, moving your lips, thinking your thoughts. Did it matter at all that some shared lifeblood too? I used to think I could tell those two apart by small details --- expressions, moods --- but perhaps even these had been only tricks of light; I could not have sworn the motive spirits might not have flitted back and forth between the two bodies. If the world had room for two pressings of one identity it must, of course, have room for even more.

I have heard, in fact, that everyone has an identical twin somewhere in his world. I can believe it, for I even saw my own once (covering my face now instinctively to make sure the image is only eidetic, wondering if that image itself is the mithridate) --- but it was a curiosity; one could hardly fear a twin, then. Abstract thoughts, even when they were discarnate, frightened us, then; so no one ever speculated about the opposite. Until, at least, those two exemplary young people, man and woman, met at the social of a church where both were piously active, clung together with the greatest ardour and spent the afternoon and evening in that peculiar bliss which those enthralled deny goes by the simple name of rut, and arranged to meet again.

Gentle, decent, naively good-willed, they could hardly have made a more perfect match. When he called with his special gift the next evening her voice must have been taut with passion when she asked him in; opening the door he was crushed under a weighted coil of barbed wire which pinned him down so effectively that he scarcely got in more than a few slashes at her with the mundane ice pick and machete he had brought along himself, while she removed his active members with heavy shears.

She won out, of course, and when they found her had severed his most essential veins and was worrying the carcass--- though in the last throes of exhaustion --- snipping away fragments and despite her hopelessly-gorged repletion trying still to force them down her throat, then rolling them between her fingers to reduce their volume to as near zero as possible.

Then someone asked whether there might not be a perfect counter, an exact inversion, finding its slow way to each of us along a spiral path, its every breath and thought cancelling one of our own until the flesh met firm to do the same. Couched as it was in the elaborate mathematics of unified life-fields, cosmic symmetry, ontoelectronics, and Kozyrevian ergology, the idea scarcely disturbed the bourgeois in their rounds. Yet it never supposed the encounter was inevitable.

We should all have taken refuge in banality, been satisfied with the ever-valueless surfaces, the circumstantial patina of the flesh. It did not matter whether some force had been imposed by volition of a superterrestrial mind, or that time had dribbled down to a lumpy zigzag flow, or whether the search for ultimate wholeness itself (never having been satisfied with the simple or the incomplete, we saw now the triumph of completeness, of unity) had brought it on; it had come, and more terror than men had ever known now walked our ways through all the world. A reflection which walked, might walk, could walk, was probably walking, drawn to you by every negative of yours as relentlessly as the opposed magnetic poles, the ends of a rubber band --- if you fled, it hunted; if you hunted, it fled --- finding its way through all the dimensions we know nothing of, yet knowing ours --- not just irresistible but superseding any question of defence, by the knowledge the lacunae in its own thoughts gave--- sniffing out your fear with a weasel's fearlessness. (If I could cultivate fearlessness might that not drive it from me? But I could not... that fear was not in but was one of the very roots of my being; without it I was as alien and dangerous to myself as they...)

Where mirrors stood man-high they had invaded forcibly and at once, swinging out like rifting glue into earthly volume and claimed with the bitter hiss of acerbic interaction the flesh they twinned. Once they were in the world there was no more hope; survival meant they could not be evoked at all. Where mirrors squinted, clamped, we heard they could only be seen moving, groping closer, unbound at last, though perhaps there too they were able to wriggle through worm-like, protean, rise up to fulness, to corner and ignite. Certainly no one who had seen this telescoped phenomenon had lived to tell of it. Probably it took no more than a single hand emerged, an easy issue from almost any wound; and any brilliant surface was a wound, those all the worse which, crimped and barrelled, brought out a flattened, swollen pulp of squirming flesh to face its model for the last recognition.

Where waters lapped nome-wide, floated the slaver of the sun or moon, they lifted up, gelatinous ampoules discharging the translucence of their invocation in a matter of moments no less thunderous, whole bodies of pure spluttering end. Though whether these distorted, astigmatic versions refracted themselves down to man-truth as they charged, or whether they remained that travesty of birthright water favoured, forcing us as by cobra-eyes to confront a malignancy of a self, no one knew; no one knew how many had been surprised at home, how many hunted down. The emptiness we toured told us enough.

We avoided all the crucial leaks we could imagine; yet they persist in reaching us, plucking us one by one. No one agreed on signs or clues; too many fears hatch from transparent myths. Laughably our men feared the silent corpses, or groped to find whether a man's heart beat on his right or his left. *Their* hearts would not beat on the left --- they would not beat *at all* --- unless they were dead! --- though of course they had no death to fear, nor any fear, actually, at all. That dark house with the brain and heart still willing in their pans might have been the site of a victory for ours; they were certainly no sediment of our kind of man. Yet left to age, they would grow young; left to dry, they would wax fresh. That victory was fanged...

We had passed cliffside buildings, their bases at sharp crazy angles, and when the windwhistle sank we could hear through the windows the falling of a wide river through white rapids and then a cascade of some height --- hilly country again, with forests coming on---

Suddenly the motor coughed. We were swinging around a bend and a gleaming river broken into foam emerged beneath a sullen moon. Slowly the car slid into the shadows of the trees and came to a despairing halt, and in one movement we were out on the road running; the darkness, our safety wrap, enemy to light the conjuror of fates and destinies, that total darkness which precedes the dawning we had little chance now of ever seeing, was still absolute among the trees...

There is no sense in not panicking. When the first coughs passed out like the stabbing of nails into coffin lids we looked at each other --- *face on* --- for the first time since we had any recollection, and *saw* each other's faces --- the fellows of our odyssey and misery --- and had to get out and run, seek blindness in shadows ---

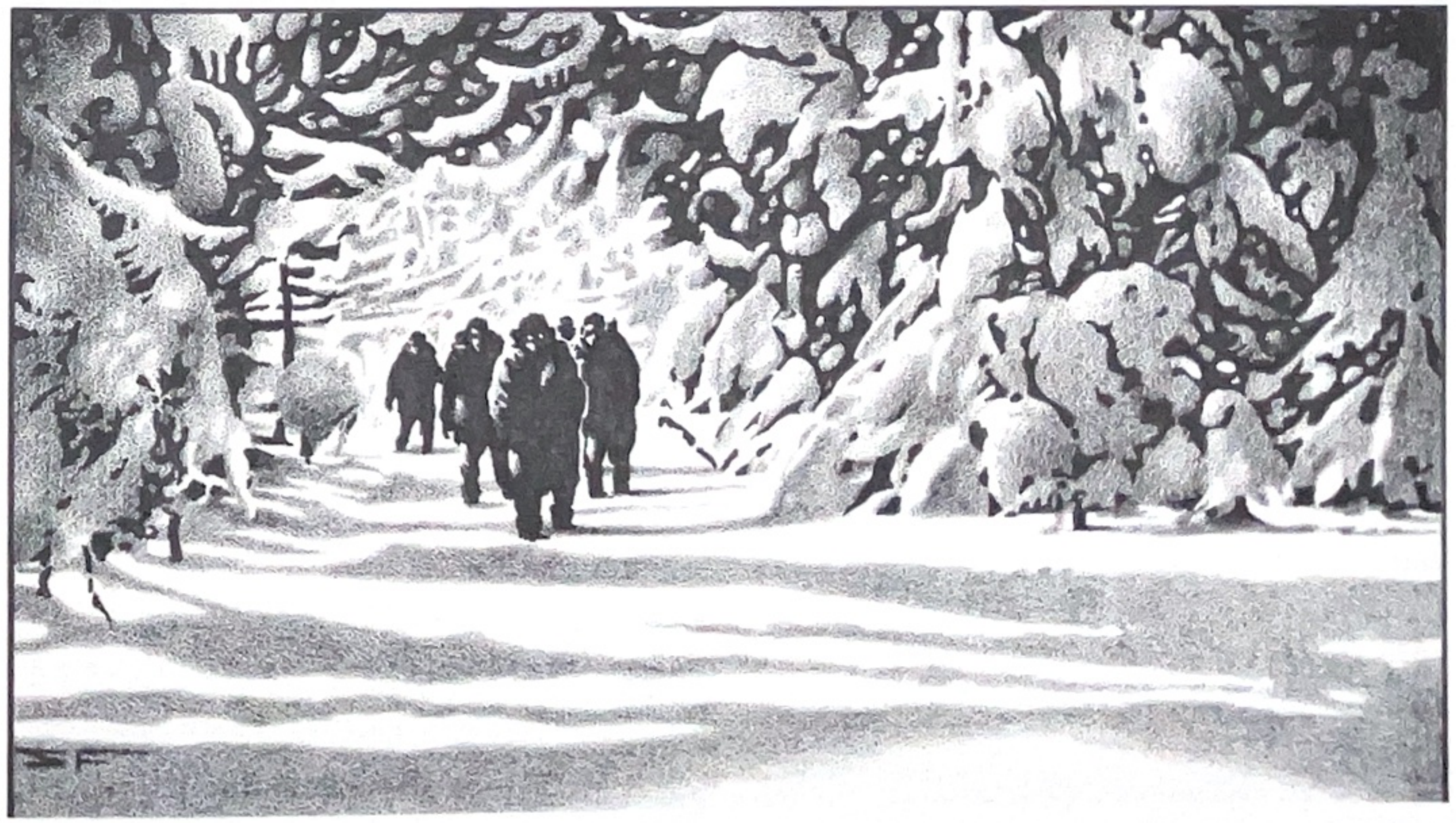
Head-on as a wall I strike those thoughts which I have been avoiding, were always with me if I had dared to see them:

It is no chase, but an advance. We have memory, but they do not. They of course move toward us from the future --- knowing all the duration of our futile flight exactly where we finally meet!

And how reach at us from that horrible infinity of ignorance from which we both took our leave, to this unbearable junction? We of course never looked at each other, tried even not to allow the sheer being of our own bodies, much less theirs (fearing always the infiltrators, the counterpart fiend treading close behind), feared the doubts and speculations in our own heads almost as much as their casings --- could not admit that we felt cold, hunger, panic, pain, emptiness --- did not admit to having mouths (twanging larynges, wheezing lungs, tetanied tongues), ears (rabbiting hearts, twitching brains, semaphore nostrils), hands (braying muscles, belching veins, gravelling joints) --- or *eyes* --- jelly-knots harder than the brain itself, deposited by light between hot horror and our own fever, carrying in their cameos that chink floored with black opal, that little pregnant mirror where any man could see what looked like but was not himself, and thereby opened --- allowed to open --- or engendered that mortal double, that unfailing fuse to extinction, that we fled and fleeing carried with us, ensured!

They had tracked us every step, waited with every hesitant glance, slept with us at total ease, not at our elbows but *within the neighbor face*, until shock and starlight had given us to them; had killed those in their trees who could no longer forsake the sight of a fellow face; the phosphorescence of our stares in darkness could have done it.

The driver turns as he nears a crumbling dark mill; moon and river, those twin flails to shadow, have the rest. Seeking the piles of vines and shrubbery I take the forward, inward path, to avoid both him and sight, but it makes a sudden turn into the moonlight and helplessly I hurtle on him, seeing his face, familiar as it is, needing no glow to be affirmative in the shadows, as distinct as commonplace --- a face aware of a monstrous oncoming death, yet not resentful, querulous, protesting, not accepting with mindless resignation, but with a sense of dignity, of an unfit but inescapable passing of the hand of a clock to its hour --- as if it were a foreseen but inevitable accident. That face, asserting itself quietly as a man, yielding nothing that is uniquely his to the unutterable terror that has become the life-force of us all, is familiar, of course, not because it is the driver's but because it is my own, not mine but what the silver judged from me, and I * * *



Acid Soul And Sulphurous Sweat

She had been found, they told me, lying face down and doorward on the path before her house, just at dawn. Her face was wrinkled and fallen in, her hands were gnarled claws, her feet worn and parrot-like, as befitted her age. But her body was still full and fleshy: her breasts the firm swollen mangos, unmarked and unfallen, her lips and thighs as rounded and able as those of a girl just wakened to the pleasures of the flesh. Her belly was smooth and slender. The skin remained on her hands, head, and feet. The rest of her body it had abandoned.

They did not find the skin anywhere. The house and near vicinity were hesitantly searched. Many villagers saw the body before it was covered, so the word spread rapidly; but the police never saw fit to look in. The cause of death did not seem a matter of concern to anyone. It was the corpse itself which was interrogated and accused.

In Dominica such a thing is called a soufriere; the same word is used for the odorous hot springs and mud pits which dot the quiescently volcanic island. These too have personalities: each one stutters to a different drummer; each blisters the touch with its individual brand, and each breathes a quotient of poison into the heavy wet air. When Roosevelt John first took me up to Poltava village on his motorcycle we stopped in to see some of these near Wotten Wavern. Actually he wanted to visit some seldom-seen kin, but to make the trip appear for my benefit climbed a hill puffed over with vapours to the most mysterious of these wells, which was said to speed up whenever approached, as if expecting a squawking offering. Its output of gurgles and bubbles did rise as we closed in and stood by, and seemed to diminish as we moved away, though perhaps we heard then only the louder coughs.

Knowing we would get nowhere with direct questions, we wasted an hour or two in Poltava pretending to be in search of a house for me, getting details of public transportation to Roseau and the like; this of course was designed to bring to notice all the houses currently vacant, but the villagers did not for a moment suppose that I might be interested in the mean little shack in question. Eventually we withdrew to Anselm Charlemagne's rum shop where Roosevelt passed the time of day with the locals as I sat in feigned mystification. I did not have to put on too much of an act. I could understand patois, but Roosevelt was too young and too little seen in the village to be trusted with the old-timers' confidences; the local topics might as well have been Sumerian.

Poltava is an unusual village even in Dominica, being very nearly flat; it is the farm patches which are on the steep inclines which fief most of the island. The congested jungle presses down from nearly sheer cliffs and muffles the cold mountain stream which bisects the town, but there is a sense of horizon, of openness. High on the narrow, detached ridges overhanging are a few of those isolated houses perched right at precipitous edges, which always seem to me somehow ominous or forbidding; but the house we sought, it turned out, was not far out of the centre of town.

I had got word of the prodigious death only as I arrived on the island, and had had to settle in before coming to palp it. She was buried now. "In the churchyard?" So it seemed; at least there was a fresh mound of sodden black earth there. People knew little about her. She had lived there much of her life--- a life too long to leave any who might have known from where she came or what had made her herself. Kin were not known, and none had come to enquire about her when her death was reported. Evidently she had no means--- not an unusual state in rural Dominica--- but no one questioned that her own fruit trees and dasheen patch, a little light pilfering from her neighbours', eternally compassionate credit at the store and a mensual term of discreet begging out of town, was sufficient to maintain her. Old and quiet, credited with neither friends nor enemies, her laughs and loves obliterated by local indifference, no one carried stories against her.

There had been no more nor less tragedy and bewitchment than were normal for a town of Poltava's size. (Dominicans are rather more superstitious than most Antilleans, but seem by contrast to assume a set of natural laws as impassive and impersonal as those greater, if equally illusory, cosmic rules with which the physicists catechise the rest of us; misfortunes were a part of the entropy race.) Some damage had been done to Ozan Gregoire's banana plantation a few nights before, but it was machete mischief, and soufrières are not known to employ machetes; one of Gregoire's young sons was a master of the craft. Some hogs of Hilarion Parillon's were doing badly, which was not an unusual state for hogs of Parillon's or others. Nor were any particular visitations in the past recalled; even hindsights were too much for these circumscribed farmers to invent.

They received my enquiry as to whether any serum had leaked onto the earth *in situ* from the corpse with equanimous, but total, incomprehension. It did not seem that any peace had been restored to Poltava by the monster's death; it seemed that none had been disturbed beforehand.

Once the subject had been broached it was possible to ask the way to the house. It was the smallest and crudest of shacks, rebuilt, no doubt, after every hard rain. (In Dominica this means quite often.) A large cinnamon tree stood outside the door, and a soursop and guava grove hemmed its walls. The yard was of trodden mud and leaves without grass; not even blossoms (everywhere else abundant) contested the bleakness.... The dasheen patch out back had already been looted: to some at least no fear attached to the dead woman's possessions.

The house had been ransacked before, and the door was closed. I felt no urge to go inside; the mediocrity of it all, restoring my sense of the indecorous, put me in mind of woman rather than monster. It was not the poverty alone which was so dreadful--- there are hundreds like this over the island, some of them housing the happiest people I've known --- but the monotony and barrenness of a long life inched out between sun and sun in ignorance of the fragrance of the world's winds described like acrid smoke around the axes of this house. A turnspit bound to a meatless skewer had for decades circled a cold fire. Little wonder that she would--- if she could --- slip off her skin and skulk out in nude meat--- for what, if not the otherwise impossible violence and ecstasy of pure will-play?

Roosevelt was already kicking up the cycle when I remembered, "The skin! What did they do to the skin?"

"Who?"

"Whoever found it."

"Nobody found it."

"Somebody did--- in the dark hour, that morning. That's the whole thing. In Jamaica they call this kind of a thing a *duppeh* (him eye shine like fire); they say if you find the skin while the thing is out haunting, you salt it so that when the body returns it can't stand to get back inside; so when the dawn light hits it still outside it's finished. Somebody here knows, somebody has the secret, and *somebody* --- if there's anything to this at all--- was in this shack that night to treat it, or carry it off. Somebody knew whether she walked, saw her so. Envious? fearful? the religious?--- or maniac? What was the rationale?"

Once again we set out on the maddeningly protracted, but only feasible, oblique questions to establish--- since it seemed that no one had complained against her --- who might have been versed in witchery, down to simple herb-lore--- who might have possessed the exorcistic knowledge--- or even who might have walked by night.

With the advent of motor vehicles, Dominicans gave up the habit of rising at two or three in the morning and binding a lighted flambeau to their heads to pick their ways down the coarse mountain trails to Roseau market, but they continue to differ from other islanders in having no great fear of the black times and night-paths; anyone might have been out; no one could say.

Of wise women, herbalists, we found one or two; one was an undeceptively shallow old charlatan. The other, Fatima Carbon, was a shopkeeper sufficiently well off to find it unnecessary to ingratiate herself with strangers; she was impervious to indirection, her face forbidding, though her venom, I think, ornamental.

She said forthrightly that she doubted anyone in the village had either suspected the existence of the creature or known the means of countering it. "Solomon never ruled Poltava," she added, looking at me significantly, knowing that I understood.

"Was it a were-thing, then? A wind-walker? Just a periscope for the evil eye?" She cogitated, studying me. "But surely anyone would know to salt it?" She shrugged. "Are there other means?" Other shrugs. "Would such a person leave the skin or carry it away? If it were buried first---"

Her eyes told me nothing; her mouth said, "Things are not always what they seem."

"Clichésville," I told Roosevelt outside again. "Never trust anybody who speaks English," he answered, "if that's what you two were speaking. She got a message in there somewhere."

"Hoity toity."

I had whitefeathered. I was going to say something about the Jamaican business of putting out grains of rice for the addled *duppeh* to count--- it can't count above three and won't give up trying, so it never makes it inside a house so protected--- when that scrap of book-learning somehow brought on the horror which wholesale immersion in this actual site had failed to do--- a realistic vision of the skinless body walking, flaunting its gleaming gristles and bubbles of fats, a flayed being glowing with emotions less than or other than human--- skin actually pulled away from throbbing flesh, eyes aglow with bestial power --- and someone quiet as a rat, probably agued with terror, sneaking in to treat it so as to consign its owner to the oven-savagery of sun searing away her reddened quick. I had suddenly grown queasy.

We decided to go. Those passing turned to look at me with a curiosity neutral or unfriendly; I was more remarkable, for the moment, than this laxly remembered being. The monstrosity of monsters is a relative thing. To those in the city this event was incredible; here, while not exactly a commonplace, it was a congruent part of the culture, unworthy of a distracting measure of attention. Evidently non-predatory horrors intrude on this world only sufficiently to serve as a small reminder, from a contemptuous universe, of its capacities.

I gave up the notion of seeing the grave; it was just a grave. We got back on the cycle and started down the steep loops of pavement to sea and heat. The central plateau of the island is always cool, the glossy greens brilliant but not glazed, the air sweet with lemongrass. The pavement is in good condition but the terrain is not, the switchbacks and sidelong sweeps are dizzying, and speed has to be kept low, so that speech is still possible on a motorcycle.

"How did you read the shadow-speech of implication?" I asked into Roosevelt's ear; "any leads lurking among the syllables?"

"Yes," he snorted back. "'Solomon never ruled Poltava.' Or in the most succinct patois, *Bungiu, si ou a savve ka oulou* et cetera et cetera.... Pigeons on the grass alas."

We dove down a long easy slope, and the grey thuribles of Wotten Wavern came into view on the left.

"How long will skin last in a soufrière?" Taking it as a pun, he only grimaced. "I mean it--- would they throw it in one of those?"

"What makes you say that?"

"Just wondering. What they salt on the dry islands they might sulphur here... what's the connection between the names?"

"Don't know.... none..."

A few weeks later I led a sortie into the fuming chambers of Miltonic hell. I could have had hell on a mountain, hell in a valley, or hell in a pit; I chose to breach it on the mountain, where its brimstone breath was whisked by fresh winds and its heat tempered by icy streams from the heights; there were some risks, but less than in going down into the depths. The output of odourless sulphur dioxide from the panting pools of the Valley of Desolation is so great as to make it dangerous to remain there for more than a few hours, and potentially fatal to lie down there; the Boiling Lake--- a churning reservoir of oblivion--- rose like hell from its thousand thrones a hundred years ago and made the trees of the valley and mountain bow down; now it belches unpredictably from its den, invisible but from the brink of its crumbling walls. Wotten Wavern by contrast was a neatly landscaped smattering of cauldrons, most of the hissing vents expectorating their jaundiced muds along the courses of the rivers, in poisonous defiles which the sun did not dare. But on its slopes the degree of incline was such that the heavier and more dangerous gases were likely to sink and run, over ground or water, in lethal knee-high currents out of our field of operations.

My legions bore the instruments of mantifuge iron and dimension-kneading glass, prescribed by the modern demonology, and we teased the spirits of the stench from their obnoxious occupations and carried them still unseen up the acherontian walls of the gorges into the open where, by trapping adroitly a smouldering sun we could finally delineate (and end) the vitality those tiny hordes celebrated in green and purple.

Unwithered leaves nod close to the pit-mouths, granting the whole an aspect of dubious peace, but this mild hell offered offences not only to the nose and Krause bulbs but to other raw sensors in the brain. Between this earth and man the quality of mercy is much strained; an island which taps the flatulence of terrestrial sigmoids to breathe so much stythe so persistently into its own air spouts out too black moods; I bent to question my lifelong urge toward harmony with being, to think of the earth briefly as a confinement and exploiter, dotted with torments. The soft bedding of emotions was victimised, shrivelled.

My file of infernal toilers passed to and fro from the billowing mud mouths into the light, obscured by puffs of shifting steam, and were convinced in a remarkably short time that life was indeed comfortably at home in hellfire. I had seen those microbes many times, if never in a milieu so proper to their tropes, so gave my students an early respite from their Stygian labours. They went downriver for a swim.

I went further: one of the largest of the soufrieres in the cliff below had been covered by a landslide during recent floods, so that its steam now percolated through the very earth that buried it. The fecund undergrowth of Dominica--- a spatulate green tarot of hearts and spades, sistra and sceptres, mobulars and maces, with obese filigrees and crockets of tree ferns and gneta--- was here enveloped in a foetid stationary cloud. Somehow the roots remained alive; they may have been diabolically infused. The whole cauled grove had a prefloral, Mesozoic look, capable of fanged giants and thrashing brainlessness.

It was much hotter, and more humid, than on the upper slopes--- and not only gloomy but dangerous--- my foot sank suddenly without warning into a loose spot, where a new furnace-spout was poking up. I returned after a brief inspection.

Less than half way back to the river Télémacque Cools-Lartigue met me, pretending casually to towel himself while watching me sharply through narrowed lids.

"Meet with anyone down there, sir?"

"Should I have?"

He turned to follow me up without taking his eyes from the cottony surface which alone could be seen through the fronds from where we stood.

"Never know. My brother Celsius," he said off-handedly, "go down there one evening when it first break out and meet one sweet lady sitting down there somewhere, by the edge of the smoke. Seem she was very all right..."

"But?"

"Nothing so very frightful, I guess. He really gone for she, but she always seem to roll away just as he about to break loose. He find she two or three time down there, but never again. Look all over the villages and country and never find her. Celsius very taken, sir... not like he."

"But he saw her face clearly?"

"Well... not clearly, I guess, sir. He always meet her rather late."

"You're saying it was a ghost, then."

"No, sir, none at all. Women only unpredictable. You look for such a lady or you prefer one you can finish with?" Perhaps it was a roundabout warning. Dominicans can beat anyone at circumlocution.

"Isn't there something magical about any woman who can hang up a man so much?"

"Well, I know some magical women that didn't hang me up at all."

"What would such a --- a being, think to gain by tempting a man so? Little demons?" But the notion of any man having to be tempted was foreign to him. I had to rephrase. "What happens if you have sex with a soufriere, Lartigue?"

"I expect you learn to get along without a cock, sir."

"You don't think it would be fatal, then?"

"*That* fatal for *me*, yes."

"Yet an island man wouldn't be slow to get to business with an unknown woman he met on a dark trail at night even when he couldn't see her face?"

"Well, you *know* that, sir. Face isn't what he busy with."

"Even here among these soufrieres there wouldn't be a difference?"

"Oh, I suppose one or two might think twice there, yes."

"Including you?"

"Perhaps... for the sake of conversation."

"And you would be more likely to meet a soufriere here than elsewhere?"

"You think one come from another, eh, sir? ... I can't say I hear it so. If she bound to keep vigil by these stinks it hardly seem she wait for loving or for jolly..."

"And a man seduced--- sorry, a man already involved with one might have to get at her, destroy her, to keep himself eventually from being swallowed up?"

"I suppose so, sir, but how he going to do it?"

"If he found out how to get her--- where to get her skin--- couldn't he treat it somehow?"

"Never hear so, sir. If anyone live to tell of copping a soufriere I never hear it said... but then if you likely to meet them where hell is closest, that is among the soufrieres, sir. Maybe they have to breathe the sulphur the way we breathe the oxygen, like those little scum in there, sir. You didn't tell us once if there weren't any ozone the sun would burn our skins off in two minutes? Maybe she consort in the upper air... "

"But the rest would follow quickly. It wouldn't be selective." Damn it all, how could pedantry surface at a time like this? "So there really are demons to be met in these compatible regions... watching through the eyelets of the leaves... and where the steam-breather has a licence you can expect the blood-drinker, the shadow-eater, eye-scorcher, bone-breaker, wryhead, white-tooth..."

"Sir?"

"Just thinking... To think a man would risk yielding to the embrace of an unknown woman down in those rotten-egg saunas, sinking down to find his chest and belly cradled on the slick white fasciae of bare muscle... being encircled by freshly flayed arms whose clasping hands alone still crinkle under skin... dare to penetrate a body so alien it might turn to jelly beneath his thrust, or dissolve into a slime that would engulf him..."

"Sir...."

Roosevelt, my brother Alex, and I were disciplining a quart of rum on the wall by which the back yards of elevated Goodwill overlook the dark cubes of Roseau--- which sort of ceases to exist around nine p.m.--- when the local Peace Crop bicycled up with a characteristically uncouth challenge.

"Why aren't you three drunks out to welcome the sea turtles on Rosalie beach?"

"That what they calling smugglers these days?"

"Attack of the crawling mammy-tanks, man--- equinox--- egg-laying time. Last chance to cop the act before extinction. Thought you might be interested enough to scare up a car."

Alex managed to bully his into life, and the four of us started across the mountain ribs' dark canopied roads to the Atlantic shore, the only side of Dominica to experience the overlay and undercut of full oceanic tides. Once we were safely across the divide, the Peace Crop got around to mentioning that no turtles were known to have come in for a year or more; in any case, the vernal equinox, their appointment with immortality, was a day past.

But inertia held. We descended the windward coast and wound through the west-inclining trees, left the car and fought through fallen palm trash and matted young growth to the smooth sweep of midnight under midnight, a scimitar of black sand which sheared off the sea's porcelain-combed tresses under a giant chatoyant moon.

Roosevelt, Alex, and the Peace Crop lay down and took the night at face value. Since I actually wanted to see the turtles, in the event they chose to heave their antediluvian bulks out of the black-jewel scrolls and onto the jet bib to give up their eggs to the ministry of chance, I began jogging the length of the beach, to stay awake. After a few turns my clothes were sodden with sweat and spray, and slapped grit-plastered against my legs, so I tore them off and paced the breeding-ground clad in breeze, spume, and the winding bituminous grains, joined to earth, sea, and sky.

Except for a sniffing manicou--- which crept out of the bush intending to nibble at the sleepers' toes, drawn down perhaps by some ancient thread through its narrow skull to this shoal of darkness under this moon of moons--- the night passed sterile. The tide rose slowly, weary with its four billion years of futility; despite the jaggedness of the cliffs and spars behind us there was something intensely real about this place and hour.

For all the millennia since the fires had built and the rains begun to shred it, the plated suffetes of the sea had sought this island to endure for the only time in their year the grapples of the earth on their enormous bodies as they crawled ashore, presented themselves to the scorekeepers of evolution, and returned to ride the waters no more plumb than pumice, having to replenish two tropics' worth of torment and exhaustion--- the price of extending their lives into our foreign element.

The arrival of us animose bipeds who alone were indifferent to their archaean armour had not changed their thoughts or habits; they con- tinued to exercise their prime purpose here even when the full crop of their eggs went down the throats of their usurpers instead of into the funnel of time. The long-inviolate armour and the longevity it ensured were at last decreed obsolete. They had worked neither good nor evil; they died for no sin but grandeur; they were not envied even that.

A pity, M. Lamarck, that they chose to weave a set of ribs when knitted wits were needful; they should like hermit crabs have rather taken on those shells strange fish forsook, that in an hour such as this they might cast them off to ease their burden... the moral: fabricate only what you can forsake (and seek more desert shores when *Homo* calls).

Would an unshelled turtle met on this sand rear up in equality of joy? I had sloughed off the fabrications and I was in no better shape. The black grit gnawed not only my feet and ankles but, spray-expedited, over much of my torso. A dash through the breakers would relieve me of that momently, only to set ticklike crystals of salt elbowing into my pores, each transit of the beach adding more sand. My skin was a network of minuscule smarts.

But taking off the slopping, rasping clothing had been a small fee to pay for the full exhilaration of sea-breath and moon-tone, to dance like a *possédé* or--- who cared?--- like a sprite --- while awaiting without question a rendezvous with dead things. If I could shrug off too the itch, pain, heat, and horripilations themselves, might I gain even more--- the restored robustness of true youth--- of wild preterrestrial being?

If there were those who could, how then could they on divorcing themselves from the foundation of humankind stoop to the petty antipathies and selfishnesses of the world-entangled? Only when one woke again bound harshly in wrinkled hide with all the plagues that wrap is heir to, would fear and hate fit inside again. Was that it? A romp through the night free from wisdom, pain, and weariness--- a return to the endless round of the same? A night of mitigation would make the punishment all the more excruciating--- would make Hell hell. So that it was no challenge but a relief to be able to cast breath after the vanished skin and gutter before the grinding friction promised by another dawn. Most peoples' sins corrode their bodies from within, but the universe is always in balance.

No peril dogged her night-walks then; no harm was stored in her. Not the discoverers of that cleaned body, but rather those who had watched its owner in her portable purgatory scythe her way through exacerbating hours, had looked upon the brands of hell. Clothed in it she crept unheeded; free of it, she broadcast nightmares. There was a threat there, of course, and our safety lay in that cerebral filter through which men face and feud with the richly strange; but it was within us.

As to that ultimate sin which divided her from the calmer fates of others, I could scarcely doubt that it was itself the urge for such abandon, for oneness with the elements, for soul-nakedness of being--- but tinged with the rot of lust for selfish power, for means of man-mastery, all those aspects of the strictly prisoned plane--- since that alone, in the end, eluded her.

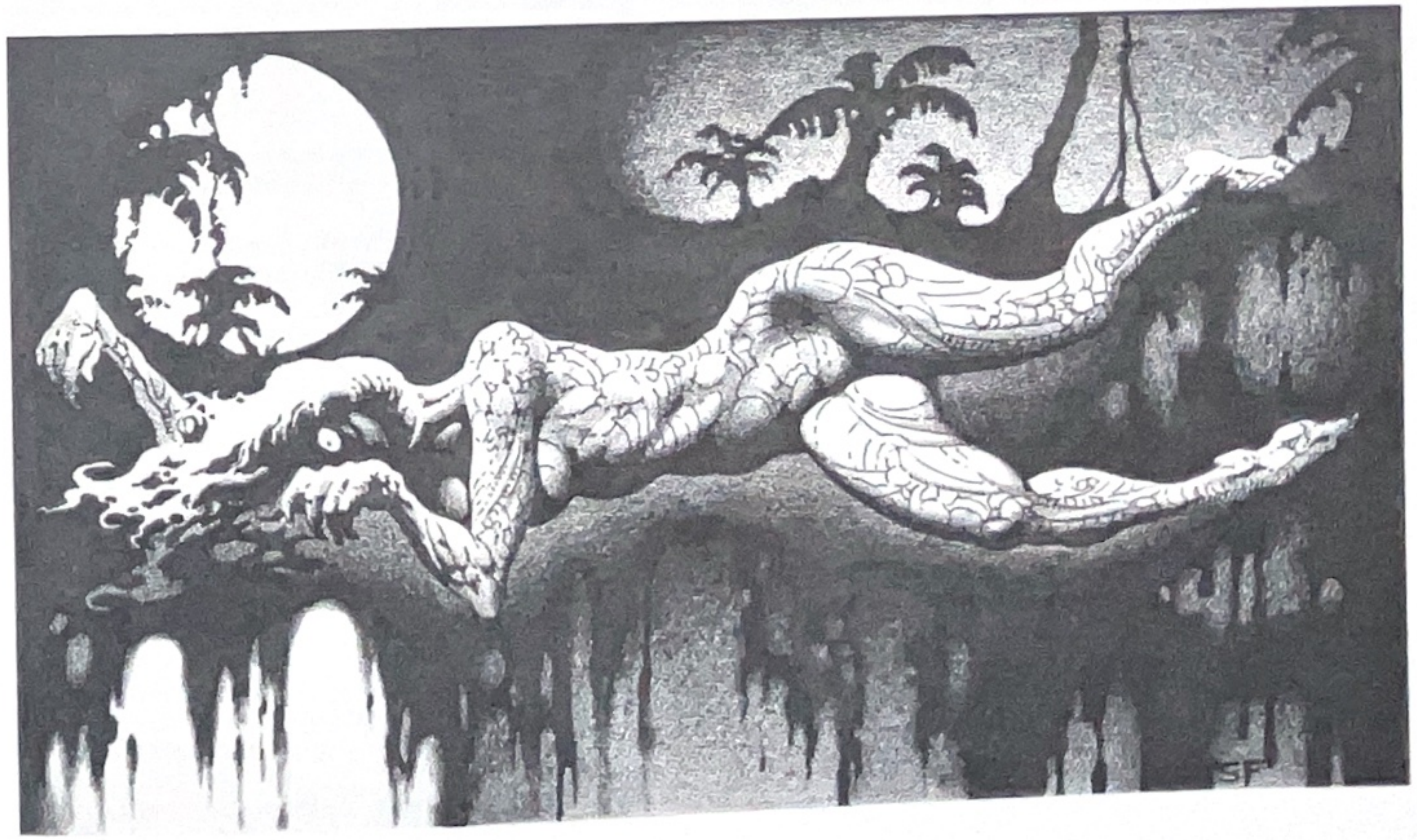
But what had happened to that skin? Did it vanish like a curse at the clockstroke of expiation?--- or was there an exorcist or meddler, bodhisattva or sadist, who had the answer? We hovered at the end of an age. Sooner or later, for lack of eggs, turtles would cease to celebrate the equinox in black; sooner or later--- wooed by that same dead sister world?--- soufrieres would cease to wear moonbeam and mist.

I drove away the exasperated manicou for the last time, though the tide had then crept up to lick the sleepers' soles. They roused and pushed back through the jungle groggily. I pulled on my clothes thinking how it must feel to don discarded skin and find it salted with hot chat. Every inch of me was sanded by it. With skin or without--- with sulphur or with fireware to feed the blood--- agony is a catholic thing.

"What a man," Alex grumbled as we got back in the car. "Up all night and still fresh." In the Indies the word is not a compliment, but after the scraping jolt back over the volcanos' spine it was no longer deserved. Grey drizzle greeted us in place of dawn as we swooped over the last ridge down to Roseau's malachite sheaves.

"Everything fleshly dies," she said; "everything man makes breaks. Every tree falls; every cable snaps. But every thought is forgotten and every love lost; every hatred moulders, every forgiveness swindles... the skin wilts, takes on the brands of age, loss, defeat. Once it has taken on so many stripes it feels no more--- if there is no more space for time to frank. Then it is done, as sometime every sin, passing or profound, is eaten up.

"Perhaps she who walks can judge the time, can carry out that pleated wrap and cast it in the same deep-crawed fires by which she sat so many judgments. Who knows? Perhaps someone or something comes from the pits or the night, or out of the sea or the sky, and carries it away... Perhaps it frays and tatters, and sifts at last like dust across the floor... blows through the door into the face of her whose bondage then thus ends. Who knows? Who knows."



The Last Golem

"An unusual request, doctor."

"I gather from the circumstances that this is an unusual case."

"Conclusions are better not gathered from circumstances, doctor. We do not violate internal security to pander to the curiosity of civilian personnel."

"Is the curiosity of the Institut für Rassenbiologie so irrelevant, then, Herr Oberleutnant?"

"What is so remarkable, then? ... All I can tell you is that this creature, along with numerous others, was taken during the storming of the Slacyn ghetto. He was one of a crowd which had retreated into the synagogue---like rats to their sewer. Owing to the fact that this mob ---women and children in the main---put up such a fierce and abusive resistance, our beset-upon Protection Squad were obliged to defend themselves heartily, and to take extreme measures in pacifying the insurgents. However, I believe they restricted themselves to clubs and gun butts.

"Essentially all of them fell, except for the specimen you have been examining. Herr Kommandeur Böhm specifically directed him to you.... It appears that, passive as he is, his resistance to subjugation was not merely stubborn but unusually successful. Though in a daze, he showed no reaction to repeated blows, and was positioned in the courtyard where our men lined up, one after the other, to deal him the strongest clouts of which they were capable. Finally, their arms tiring, they kicked him around the yard, evidently for hours, without any noticeable injury or even a groan. Nothing but a pure beast, of course, is capable of withstanding such discipline uncomplainingly... but surely you've seen the evidence of all this; why ask me?"

"I found no bruises or scars of any kind, Herr Overleutnant. That is the least puzzling of his deficiencies. May I assume then that no one else in the synagogue, or the ghetto, survived? Specifically, the rabbi?"

"What an absurd question!" A glare of suspicion backlit Strevelscher's fortress-like face. "A rabbi surviving! There are perhaps twenty survivors, out of nine hundred or more. I am not at all sure the rabbi was even found --- not that I can distinguish one of the animals from another. Our Squad, naturally, did not note down names, occupations, or addresses, or their haul.... whatever could provoke such a question?"

"You know nothing of these Hebrew myths, I take it?"

"God forbid!"

"Let me describe the subject to you." Dr. Orendorff picked up a lengthy report. "Height, 160 cm. Weight, 73.2 kg. Build, very stocky. Features, indeterminate, regular; Hebraic by association only. Scars, birthmarks, deformities, et al., none. Hair, black; beard, shaven and not regrown, despite length of confinement; pallor, extreme. Body hair---" he paused, "--- none. Muscle tone, very flaccid; reflexes, nil; expression, vacant. Temperature---" a pause again, "--- 25°C.; pulse... almost indistinguishable. Voice, none; larynx congenitally undeveloped. Hearing, evidently most imperfect --- intelligence, as evidenced by obedience to verbal commands, very nearly zero. Evidence of endocrine disorders, bacterial infections, or other pathology, none.

"Skin and features, extremely coarse. There are no fingerprints--- nor are the fingers covered with any scar tissue indicating that they might have been eradicated. There are no creases in the hands, nor on the soles. Inspection of the mucous membranes, eye structure, and the like, suggests a remarkable lack of tissue differentiation.

"In short, we have here a subhuman in which all mental and physical functions have unprecedented limits."

"There is nothing surprising in that," Strevelscher said easily.

"I see you have no scientific curiosity," Orendorff said with sudden disillusion, dropping his papers.

"Quite the contrary, dear doctor. There is no matter of interest to which the Aryan mind does not and can not apply itself. Certainly I know that manual---" he gestured to the black-bound *Rassereinheit und Rassenhygiene* --- "thoroughly and intimately.

"Yes, you mention peculiar features. I don't doubt the preserved body will delight the savants of, and form a prominent display in the museum of, the Rassenbiologie Institut. But why the rabbi?"

"Excuse me, Herr Overleutnant, but they will not be delighted or even satisfied with anything less than the metabolising body. They will want to test his antigenicities---"

"His?" Strevelscher's quick interruption was not a reflex of grammatical punctiliousness so much as it was an indisposition to recognising the individuality of any Jew; Orendorff was not distracted.

"*Its* neurology, blood proteins, heparin peculiarities, biopsies--- those oddly unspecialised tissues---"

"Surely you can do all of that yourself? We did not equip you with this excellent laboratory merely to have every sample we refer you bundled off to Berlin."

"I am fearful of the wrath of the specialists there, however, if I tamper further with what appears to be a unique specimen of such extreme racial degeneration. My attache, Hauptmann Langendorfer, did remove the testicles without my knowledge or consent and bungled the job quite badly---" as Strevelscher with a hard smirk lifted questioning eyebrows he amplified, "--- completely destroying the associated genital structures--- and went ahead to section them--- finding, he thought, nothing but connective tissue---"

"Ah, of course," Strevelscher broke in, his face relaxing with satisfied comprehension. "Doubtless you'll find his cranium full of the same. Yes. Zimmerman's syndrome, is it not? It would explain all the other anomalies."

Orendorff opened his mouth, but decided against contradicting the Oberleutnant, who was watching him steadily through half-closed lids, even if it were a test.

"Orders in such matters are strict, Herr Oberleutnant. To Berlin he must go."

"Your enquiry about the rabbi continues to puzzle me, doctor."

"Oh--- yes. I had thought by questioning the rabbi---" Strevelscher's eyebrows rose again, "--- I might be able to learn something of its origin, a detail of course always of great interest to the Institut."

"The origin of one Jew is the same as that of any other--- whelped out of a bicornate uterus. Could a rabbi tell you better than that?"

"You said he--- it was taken in a synagogue. Presumably then it belongs to one of the more devout---that is to say, one of the more hysterically superstitious, families, of whom the rabbi might have had personal knowledge... That pallor betrays a continual indoor occupation, possibly even in the synagogue itself... You know it is usual in such cases to collect the entire family, to search for parallel instances of degeneracy," he went on, speaking a little too quickly. "The non-survivors are already buried, I presume?"

"Burned. With the synagogue. In any case, how would you have interrogated a rabbi? Do you speak Yiddish?"

"Certainly not!" Orendorff replied indignantly, dropping back at once with affected indifference and rustling his papers. "... Then there's no more information to be had."

"Except for me,"Strevelscher said coolly, feeling for a cigarette. "Why did you speak of Hebraic legends?

Orendorff kept his face down. He knew this easy, detached manner, the casual tone; he was inured to using it himself. So far he had fended behind the shield of the Institut's supposed interest--- but now he was out in the open. That single body referred to his study had around it a narrow zone of protection, which he had carelessly left, into the unmarked field of danger. He decided desperately that a frontal attack was called for.

"May I speak in purely military terms, then?"

"I had not imagined you ever did otherwise. But if so, then by all means." Blue smoke coiled around Strevelscher's chiselled mask; its acrid antennae taunted the doctor's nose, but he kept it from twitching.

"You must be aware of the investigations being made with a view toward augmenting not so much the manpower, but rather the invincibility, of our superior army. Treatment designed to render the average man insensitive to pain and wounds, to absolute obedience with indifference to all personal risk, immunity to propaganda or any form of psychic attack---"

"Kindly do not digress into the commonplace."

"As you know, then, this state of mind is known to have been induced in various times and places, if mostly among subhumans. Among the blacks in Haiti, for instance, either drugs and/or fear reinforced with hypnotic suggestion ---both avenues being investigated among our own subjects here in the Reich---appear to produce such material, the so-called zombie, with readiness.

"Evidentally it is much less generally known that similar stories have circulated to the effect that among the decadent crafts and mummeries of the pack leaders of these Jews there are operations intended to produce much the same sort of human automata--- a vastly more efficient procedure than constructing automatic humans."

"And what exactly is the purpose of such a being?"

"Ah--- I understand it is principally to be a servant to the rabbi, or sometimes a defender of the harassed---"

"These Jews! A people who would make a goat suffer for their sins would pin their hopes on thews of idiot clay!"

"I am not particularly clear there, but in my student days an acceptably Aryan book, *Das Gespenst des Golem*, by one Hans Ludwig Held, was much discussed, and among us nascent medical theoreticians the suggestion was tossed about that underneath the data so credulously assembled (figures of clay animated by kabbalistic words, speaking statues, and so forth) was a stratum of evidence---or rather of suggestion. What was important to us was the suggestion that there was actually a loss of physical differentiation in the body following the psychic disintegration, if in fact there were a reduction to non-mentating matter. In fact the word *golem* seems to be the Yiddish for *Urstoff*, primal, amorphous, fundamental substance--- that's bye the bye. We speculated on parallels in Haiti and Africa, investigated alternate, genetic explanations.

"I made notes against a projected African trip which was never made and would have forgotten it wholly---had not given it a thought for years---had I not been reminded when Hauptmann Langendorfer accidentally recounted the incident by which he was, ah, demoted to his present post. This of course you know?"

Strevelscher's head ticked like an icicled metronome.

"Well, Herr Held's book had even caught the attention of the Institut. (This was before my association there.) Early in the occupation of Czechoslovakia the Institut sent a secret team to the Altneu Schul, the old synagogue supposedly the scene of operations of a notorious Rabbi Lev ben Bezalel in the sixteenth century---of whom many decadent superstitions are drivelled---on the basis of the tradition to the effect that the skeletal remains of one of these Jew-zombis, the golems, were hidden away in the attic. Publicly, of course, it was simply to be called another case of ritual murder exposed."

"As no doubt it was."

"Langendorfer is somewhat vague as to the course of the investigation. Evidently some of his co-workers did not perform satisfactorily under discipline. At any rate he returned to the Institut eventually with a number of bones, most manifestly fresh, and without being able to account satisfactorily for the faulty cataloguing, or the heterogeneous jumbling, of the whole collection. By that time in any case someone had discovered that as recently as 1925 one Herr Kisch had climbed up to the attic of the synagogue and found it empty anyway, and had traced the remains of the golem to their ultimate disposition in the cemetery at the Galgebarg. Rather an extensive search was made there and I gather that someone did succeed in returning to the Institut a curious, though ambiguous, skeletal collection. His success completed Hauptmann Langendorfer's downfall. His whole lot had to be discarded---an excess of zeal, I'm sure---"

"To your point, if you please."

"Yes. Slacýn of course is not far from Prague---and a very backward place, too, I believe--- Chassids and all that. A likely den of Kabbalists and other primitivisms. However that may be, and whatever the mythical corpus around such creatures, the fact remains that among these people are acknowledged such purely instinctive, undeveloped creatures. Perhaps it is a genetic anomaly, as you suggest; there are candidate conditions, but none wholly satisfactory. None, for instance, could account for this fantastic physical indomitability. So perhaps there is a technique here, psychological in origin, by which these indestructible psychic robots---for they are said to be utterly obedient to commands properly given in their own language; perhaps this one merely does not understand German--- can be synthesized and manipulated.

"My point, Herr Oberleutnant, is that if the whole process of such physical depersonalisation could be unfolded, we would have in one stroke a much-sought weapon of unlimited potency---ending for ever the element of human uncertainty in our military operations."

"Of what uncertainty do you speak, doctor?"

Orendorff stared at Strevelscher silently, clasping and unclasping his hands behind his back.

"... And for this you are going to propose, to the supreme minds and patriots of the Reich, the conscious adoption of some *Quast* out of Hebraic putrefaction? To admonish the unparalleled scientific brains of the Institut and--- God help us---the army, to sit at the feet of some pestiferous old Jew? You are not above probing such mongrel warrens, the slime and offal of subhuman myth-mongering, in search of a solution which in fact is already in application everywhere in this Reich? You believe that from a breed of subhuman not only segregating into a species, but already virtually extinct, might come the salvation of a race already confirmed as the rightful overlords of this earth?"

Monolithically, he lit another cigarette. Orendorff, not expecting so devastating a rebuttal, was wordless. Strevelscher was so anxious to get the mysterious victim into the furnace that it almost seemed he feared that a slow, systematic death might disclose its resolution into kaolin. Was even so slight a fear built into his sort of framework?

Supposing that Orendorff were allowed to dissect this strange form whose flesh seemed something totally unmechanical. Would those Kabbalistic elements conjoined in its making perhaps burst forth? The winds of the world's four corners, the spirits which navigated the whole courses of space and time, the two hundred colours which came raining down from Adam Kadmon's forehead---the lights of illumination and the twenty four perfumes, the all-healing sweet-scented panaceas... balm for all men, for ever.... would all of these envelop him above his dissecting table? Yes, to Strevelscher it would be like opening Pandora's box.

Still, he was no Kabbalist. Perhaps, as on many Renaissance coffers, there was a poisoned barb somewhere to catch the tamperer. He remembered stories of a rabbi who had thought to create a golem while still very young, and had seen a shadow pass between himself and the figure he shaped. A shape unidentified but potent enough to impede him for the rest of his days... might some dark smear embodying those drynesses and pains he could not treat stand up from this as well?

He realised suddenly that he no longer doubted the being itself---nor did he now credit his own tendentious rationalisation. Half-emerged, it seemed primal, star-powered, volcanic-fired; by contrast to its noospheric craft, the basis errors which were all the long course of biological evolution had succeeded in assembling in Strevelscher--- and himself--- added up to a holistic failure.

"You speak as if I were an enemy of the State, when my only aim is to support the Reich and further the interests of our Fuhrer."

"Of course. I believe you are partly of Slovenian descent, doctor, isn't that so?"

"Most certainly not," Orendorff burst out. "Not at all."

"Odd. Your file with us---the complete one---states clearly that your grandmother was a Slovene--- an unfortunate but frequent circumstance among these births outside the Fatherland. But then perhaps you never saw her."

The sharp picture of a peaceful, smiling face, simple as Eden in its conviction of an earthly paradise, offering the tiny bouquet of early spring in a grudging land, was shoved brusquely from the doctor's mind. "No. Never."

"Ah... Slovenes, like most of the second-grade peoples, are prone to emotionalism, hysteria. Even scientific enthusiasm can get out of hand... I can order a search for the rabbi of Slacýn, doctor, if you really want to pursue your theories with your superiors and mine...." His voice stopped on an interrogative pitch.

There were many days when the stern southern wind brought to Orendorff's window a nimbus of ash and smoke, the sweetish smell of the chimneys from the vast complex of barbed wire and barracks beyond his lab. At first he had gagged--- even though it had not been so concentrated then--- and there were times since that he shivered, sweated, gasped, groped. It was that cursed Slovene emotionalism which he tried unabatingly to subdue or expel, shifting in him, like a tapeworm.

If massive armies of depsyched beings swept over the world with the pick of modern weaponry, they could not lose. That was the only difference; everything else would be the same. *They act as if this plunge into the vortex will last for ever*, he often recited to himself; *this mass self-mutilation fuels itself; eventually they must start on the rest of us.*

"Well, doctor?" Impatience glittered like a blade.

"No, you're right... it's of no great interest."

"Into the furnace then."

"Yes."

"From *Ofenhocker* to *Ofenhöcker*..." Strevelscher was trim as steel but his laughter was flabby, messy. The horrible pun ran through Orendorff's nerves like strychnine; it was more difficult to pretend self-assurance before the blue bit of those eyes than to face up to his daily vivisection. He assessed the nerveless granitic face, the mechanically regular heart unbreachable by adrenaline or lactate, the perfectly engineered hands---dropping blood enough to flood the cellars. His hair prickled at the neck: the unmarred skin, the precisely groomed hair, the symmetrical jaw shaven to a plastic smoothness---not a wrinkle on the uniform, a fingernail one micron excess in length --- not a single imperfection or inconsistency. His stomach-skin crawled.

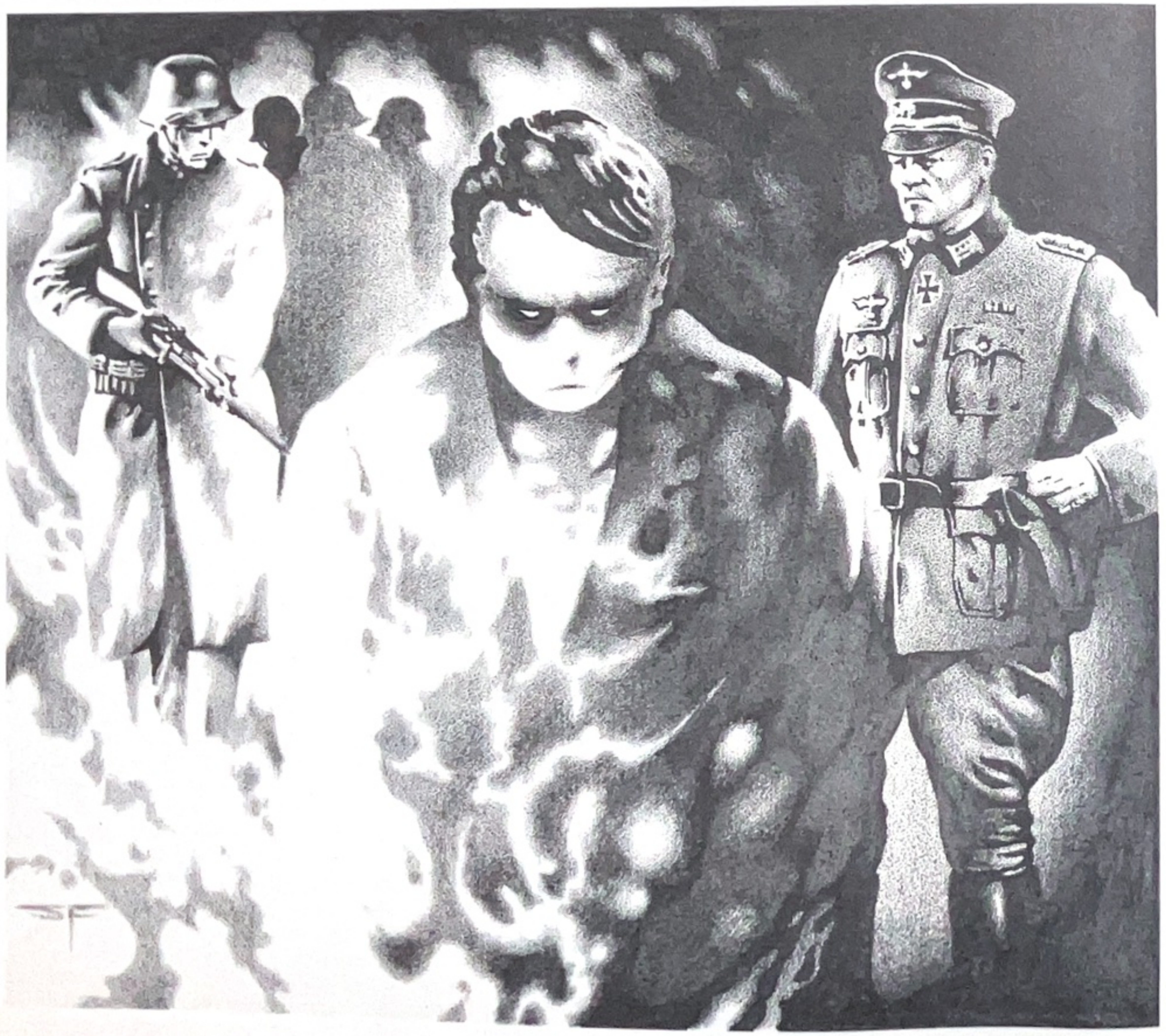
Supposedly they had determined the fate of a man formed by artifice. Yet it was not Strevelscher who was linked to the green world of fragrance and harmony by the bonds of his fleshly being. Yes, Orendorff marvelled at himself too sometimes: when his hands in the course of his operations went on, run by some alien brain; he had marvelled at their lack of compassion, their lack of nerves, their pursuit of a curiosity which he himself had long ago run through; they operated at remote control, perhaps by a self of the past or the future.

The rabbis preached that the only means of atonement, of salvation, was to live strictly according to the law. To hem oneself in so, to react eternally to games-systems and dicta the meaning of which was not understood, was to make of oneself a machine. Yet no such mechanism bid the kinship of fellow terrestrials and the fruits of the earth a farewell. Did the golem understand? It was said not. Was he not, then, the machine, but rather the true man?

As Orendorff's hands and instruments---under which had passed so many, human, semi-human, and ex-human--- had palped that cold, enigmatic flesh, fearful at every touch of the burst of nova-fire or the whirlpool of endless time, no qualm had vibrated him--- not by a second had his pulse accelerated as it did now, looking at

Strevelscher with doomed eyes---even while he revolved constantly in his mind the question, *"Could -- can -- the rabbis make soulless men?"* But he knew. What the unfeeling copulations of the super-savages could achieve, the express of will, ideal, mountain-jostling faith, understanding of and sympathy with the deep flows of the universe could easily match or best. That happenstance body was no vacuum from which nature recoiled--- but rather this one, this synchronised, healthy form from which the persona moulded by sun-oriented life had been expunged by intentional, vital will --- the body which, having known the savour of paradise in its nostrils, opted instead for blood-fumes to slake the ravening beast.

It would not be the first thaumaturgy, the only poem or phosphorescence, to be consigned to the flames; and what was more, he, Felix Orendorff, still twisting his hands--- a fearful, spineless puppet of a man unable to assert the real self inside his simulacrum--- even to proclaim himself an individual in the image of God and so go to a meaningful death --- would doubtless be looking on when the last wonder, the gnosis itself, was crammed into the furnace's maw; would watch the noon sun blacken. It was only a matter of time.



The Lamps Are Lighted in the House of Hides

Like a ghost stalking across a battlefield, permeable to spears and answering gouts, I invaded the diaphanous clamour of bats and asps (and the deposit of evaporated shrieks and hisses which archive their casual deaths) vulnerable only to fears and the shadows of fears radiating from the horrible house on the hill's crest. The faint lights blinking from its windows were as vacant and feeble as stars, and the paraphrased spectrum of moonlight grazing this choppy landscape kept all its discoveries to itself. The shrubbery I waded through glutted darkness under noon; chuckling stones evaded my feet, scuttling and yawing into the thicker night like living things. Chaotic sarsens thrust up everywhere reminded me that of all the energies expended here, out of the cratones and the helical histories of men, only the stone house remained--- that some coherent spirit--- some frightful worm of time--- was here able to conjoin the longitude of life with the chill and pallor of death.

When I could see the figure on the front step I knew I had breached the outermost rind of the fear which crusted the old building--- a heartening thought which depressed me all the more. Hoisting myself up to the stone walkway leading to the door, I planted my feet into prints gouged in the stone by immemorial passage.... lumpy triangles pointing thickly back to the dark ooze of the night, kicking up droplets of toeprints... Many had passed in, and few had returned; there was a cold grease of comfort to this which sat in my stomach, like a mute fellow by a lonely fire. But the sight of the woman, close now--- though the wan lamp she carried did not illuminate her face--- stopped me outside the door. Though she shielded her face with her hands, her eyes stood out like pinholes in a cauldron of hot blood. Enduring this red stare was the second and more difficult ordeal.

Her white garment was loose and rippled, her body esoteric. The coiled fingernails were unkempt and jagged; she was as congruous with the rottenness as a healthy mould; I expected no speech from her, but the whisper of cottony fibres.

"No--- not Tonholon," I said.

"Did you come to be with him?" Her voice was flat, even, dry.

"I came to get him."

"The moon bested you. Did you try to stop it? The ordeal is under way. Once it has begun it is ineluctable as death, and as irresistible. You may wait until it is ended... or keep vigil, if you can...."

"He is a far braver man than I am, but bravery is not always wise. I could not necessarily face what he must face, but together ---"

"No face participates, least of all your own. What he is about you could not see if you shared his orbits. Only when it is finished--- and of course only if he loses--- will words or thoughts link you again."

"A man who watches the struggles of another, however invisible they may be to him, with concern and hope, endures his own ordeal and thereby remains partner and brother to the friend he companies. That alone is something, doubling the strength---"

"A man who watches an ordeal engaging one he wishes to sway or extract, once it is voluntarily undertaken, in fact battles against the one he companies. There is more at war than the will to fight. The morning might find you a hollow victor--- over your own."

"Could I be such a menace to a friend?"

"As easily as to yourself. Where is a worse? ... Have the three of your selves sworn any pact? In most men the man-self squats upon the ape-self and stays its grunts and gropes, but the Eden-subtle serpent-self crouches spring-coiled and unsmothered beneath their authoritative stones like the unkillable ninth head. Sometimes it writhes forth like a victorious bowel-worm. Who knows its feelings when it is unhooked from you? For it is out of that being's cold and unemotional eyes that all your thoughts are born; and do they not say that the serpent, subtlest of all beasts, lies, always lies? Whose venom will not harm himself never scruples to use it against others. In every thought there is a death, as in every passion; your thoughts career and doing so reach their necessary end. Watching through the night, you'll pile death on death. You hope to mulch the monument he builds?

"But are you sure you know death's actual face? Few do. Most paint a mask and kiss no other. They wash, swath, and coffin every image in their hearts and maintain it somehow lives. They try to breathe mist into the nostrils of the skull! The living, the uncommitted, struggle against the current which bears them, instinctively as an eft--- as if there were a chance of winning free! To live is to flounder so. So when your wriggling will strikes out it crosses his--- must it not be so, if you have come so far to dissuade him?--- and you will find yourself no idle spectator but an active contestant, with an unwanted receptacle for your gall."

"I did not ask for riddles. Possibly you do not understand that death is no absolute. *He* learned that; I followed his explorations, even the most abysmal. He would turn and ask, 'Affrighted?' and once I learned to reply, 'Enneutered,' his grin would mock skulls and his strength the moon's... given my extraneous fibre, he dared everything, to the pit of being ... Perhaps to you, the will I carry is intangible as the whips the bats lay on the rigid air, but it has backed him in the past. What neither he nor I can do alone, the two of us may dare together; so, if you will--- "

Without hesitation she withdrew; I stepped into the cyclopean hall and followed her stately guidance into the warren beyond, dark, but drilled with peepholes for the moon.

Five small lights flecked that enormous hall; only five which did not quiver in the brusquest wind. I shuddered. Horror lay in the simple meagerness of their number. I thought of all the feet which had tamped cups of air into the stone outside, feet infinitely more wearing than the earth-belly's curdled fire. Five tiny bobbins of light, each in its globular lamp, a perfect ellipse blue as the winter poles... and as warm.

Ordeal as it was I had to look, as I had never seen. The spherical lamps were of stone, worn and pocked with the sourness of soil, furry with dust; the blue flame so miserly with its rays that none of them got far beyond the chinks of the orb. None were shared with the gruesome ward pegged to the wall above the lamp.

But the moon was as surgical as I. Hating to do so, I peered up at the deserted skin spreadeagled over the cold stone without a single scratch or fissure, flat as a plane of mica, bellyskin touching backskin, face stretched over scalp--- the great paradox of the fingertip, here touching itself inwardly, resolved. The mouth sprawled like a toad's, though no smile was interred there; the nose, wide as a manta's beak, gasped not for air but bone, the brainside of the scalp pimpling through its elongated nostrils. Black lines were scored across the site of forehead and jaw, though the rest of the body's wrinkles were smoothed, stretched. Ironically, only the ears--- the most useless of orifices--- retained the stiffness they had known--- as if they were the most readily forsaken appendages; a man might as well sprout them only in old age, as an aloe puts out its flower, and peel from death its last scant benefit.

Its vast expanse smooth and undamaged--- old scars healed long before abandonment--- every cell, pore, and hair disposed as in the natal schema--- it hovered above me as calmly as the bodies of those consummated ascetics which float in the air, shift with the slightest breeze... yet was as ponderous as ice.

Only five. The weight of futility crackled my ribs.

I followed, stumbling; her hand beckoned as if practised to the call of doom. Half-aware I went through pockets of decomposing air, pentacles of sticky blackness, up staircases and down thirsting corridors, over mountains of rubbish, catacombs of bat mummies, fogs of dust; her body eclipsing altogether the frail lamp, I dared not lose touch with the trailing robe, gasped and leapt to keep in pursuit.

One door stood intact. She pushed it open with some effort and a tremulous shriek answered as if the character accreted in this room had thus found an outlet for its endless torture. It was an echo to the despair quivering in my flesh.

"Until morning."

She passed me the shrouded lamp and drew back, resorbed by the shadows she disciplined; I moved in, palping the gloom, despite the moon's halting interrogation, to be sure of my ground.

The only furnishing, a primitive bed, was at the far end, and lying on it was the man I sought (so I supposed--- the face told me nothing), covered with a tattered sheet. From the farther edge of this rose a plain wooden slab leaning against the wall; fixed to and projecting from it, whitish, skinless figures whose dominant tripartite heads depended from a bulging complex of commissures and lobes, like tumours miming barnacles which had not yet progressed to mouths; figures which, in their naked vulnerability, seemed to have been wrested out of great depths in the earth, or from the body. But whole pieces of madness do not congeal in the random throes of lower strata, and there was nothing mineral about them except a vague adulraescence--- in the prevailing dimness they held no shadows. That they were smeared over with some occult mode of life I questioned, remembering my delusions of chuckling rocks and sliding stones outside. I felt carefully for that tangible repulsion which comes from the active intersection of sentiences. It was overwhelming.

They defied census, aesthetic, and measure; if equal in number to the varieties of horror they did not, collectively, amount to as much as a skullful. No two were precisely alike, though beyond a uniform loathesomeness I could not see the individuality. Perhaps they were slimy; probably one of the foul odours in the room was theirs. One alone would have provoked a seizure; together they constituted a rent into moonless dimensions from which the mind simply slid like oil. Tonholon's body shared the sheet with the lower ranks of the slab; I felt sure it was equally populous....

I wanted to shut the door--- I trusted nothing in that house--- but the screech it set up at the attempt was so unnerving that I left it and placed the lamp squarely in the opening. I could not then see my fellow's face, but welcomed this rather than otherwise; it was not the familiar, resolved one. I felt lonely as by a corpse, and touched his chest briefly to make sure I was not, but he groaned faintly, lips quivering and pinched eyelids tightening.

The frame I remembered as so massive was skeletally thin, the bones as clear beneath the shrivelled skin as the nodes of a storm on sand. Neither the person nor the strength I recalled lingered in face or body. It was the ultimate flaying--- worse than the exhibition of bone.

Sinking wearily to a crouching and finally a sitting position I tried to dull my brain to the lunacy mounting in me. At the colourless creatures facing Tonholon across the gameboard of his flesh I tried not to look again. She had said that the production of deaths--- lines of thought and image run through to their end --- might be helpful. Might not her words as easily be serpent-toothed? The flicker of crumbling impulses like the torches of suicides in their last hysterical arc should beacon death to whatever pupils hungered for it; resurrect, these electric glyphs might be treacherous weapons. Yet my brain would not empty. I forswore memories; the resolve was all that was needed, of course, to bring a green-clotted swarm of them surging up from the infirm cemetery of my mind. Some of these, certainly, were subject to death plenipotentiary; and these I gave free rein....

Our laden canoe cut its way through stagnant waters too black even to mirror the sagging skies. The reeds we drove into clattered their tocsin before we reached the bank; though we pushed forward with crude oars as long as possible, we were forced to leap out while still afloat and push it inward. Our feet sank into the slime beneath the water and I felt some jellyish thing coil around one ankle, a brittle harshness snap beneath the other foot. We beached the boat, not on the ground--- there was not a visible inch of dry clean earth--- but only on a substrate through which the murky water continued to seep and splash--- a porous, ubiquitous pavement of bones.

Everywhere---not in a pile, but in heaps, middens, mountains, as far as we could see or the reflected glimmer of the muffled stars could evidence--- piled or scattered singly, were bones: every layer beneath us was composed of fossilising remains. Nor were they all human, though preponderantly so: a handful of plated skulls had come aimlessly in from the great deeps; a centipede column of serpent vertebrae entwined about a large femur and threaded in and out of a skull; bushels of the fine tiny bones of rats added their punctuating numbers to the turtle carapaces of skulls. Yet it was not a purely osseous realm. Once we stepped a few feet from the boat we saw also an adipocere-grey bank of corpses, greenish encroachments staking their flesh, with the black ichor of the mud --- a humus built solely of flesh--- spattering the ivory virginity of their bones. Only then did the darkness and strangling foetor close down upon us.

We strained the heavy coffin out of the canoe, stumbled through the bare submerging limesticks toward a minor eminence due, in its nearness to this landing spot, to the weariness or horror of past emissaries, and peered from its crest for a meaningful marker. The ground crunched and crackled underfoot. A few maimed or diseased rats turned on their backs as they hobbled through the chalky arches, seeking out whatever ambrosia still clung to the much-edited corpses; each new morsel was accorded a squeal of delighted greed, the snap of fangs, flashing of inflamed eyes and rasp of lilliputian claws, before the victor died poisoned in the midst of his banqueting.

Bones not tenanted by these scavengers had a different and muted aspect which was welcome, for speedy as were the rats in the execution of their office the other corpses tended to resist depersonalisation, showed disquieting individualities. Feet worn to tatters when rot had already hollowed them--- hands so twisted that muscles already rigid had torn from their tendons and seized in new, altered positions--- weakened lips split with spasms asked whether they had not screamed again after death. An immortal restlessness seemed to cringe in their bodies.

With Tonholon in the lead I found it easier to ignore the horrors. Though there were ancient lanterns on the prominence, we had brought no oil; doubtless the fat which seeped around us would have soared up quickly enough, could we have borne the odour or the shadows cast by such a strange fire... I who knew fire the purifier met fire the polluter.

Tonholon seemed to grasp certain signs nevertheless, and we went forward. The quantity of bones decreased to a gravel of calcanei, tarsals, carpals --- the path wound through slender arcs and vaults of ribs, the graceful bow of radius and ulna, capitals of tibia and fibula, parabolic pelves and their femoral asymptotes. After each breathless pause I shuddered to take up a burden which grew heavier less in physical than in psychic resistance. When at last we set it down I found that the darkness had hardened. From a black cliff of drier mud protruded crusted boxes--- not ordinary coffins, as they opened only from the protruding end, having no dorsal lid. Around them loose skeletons clawed at each other for a stay from the relentless moulds...

The shattered skulls and fractured scapulae around us bore witness in their mocking measure of manhood to the hordes which had trod these paths. Yet... the boxes were few in number. I began to wonder, but Tonholon, determined as an avalanche, motioned me to one of the empty vaults, one whose sealing cap had fallen.

Those huge sarcophagi--- barriers against the diasporadic horrors waiting on the unfortunate multitudes scattered over the slimy miles of shore--- had been carved well and long ago from solid rock. Within, the favoured occupant could sleep in peace, undisturbed by nibbling rats, snakes, roaches, remissions--- or the vagaries of mental and mantic life. There was a special zone here fortified against all the horrors of death. Yet we found many such boxes empty. To whose order and to what design were bodies then removed from these cocoons? What did our careful attentions achieve our potent order if they too were only precipitated into the slime with lesser men at some later date? Of the many who had passed this way recumbent as our charge, only a few had found the refuge these boxes offered....

And if cleared out once fallen to ash, who performed the task?

Easing the corpse inside we lifted the heavy seal and hammered it tightly shut. Each beat of our hands raised gong-like echoes in the mist, reverberating through the cliff's shivering soil--- the whole clastic mound bobbing and ringing with the knell as if every bone were tuned to rhyme.

I thought there was a scratching or rustling without the timbre of an echo among the bones, and turned to Tonholon; he stood as if waiting. I backed away... a scrabbling sound surged, sawing the air.... it struck both of us at the same moment. These inquisitive clawings were coming to us through the solid rock: the tombs were resonant with animation.

Then we could see them pushing out the stone seals from their coffin-heads as easily as floc, heard the thuddings of each on the dissolving middens below. From each tomb lurched beings gelatinous and hypertrophied... even their skeletons waxed and wound under the weight of their sagging bodies. A remembered wart upon a face had become a gigantic excrescence coiling and uncoiling as the swivelling body it rode advanced. A tic was magnified into a torus quivering faster than a skimmer's wingbeat--- eyes bulged out of sockets like balloons filled with pus, once they finally saw us, then shrank to little cysts of serum as the tongues below tumesced in turn hugely as a toad's, sprawling across chin and chest itching visibly for salt, then whistling back inside the pulsing lips as the eyes attacked again. With each beat their hearts bulged like drums from their chests, great black sacs filled to bursting--- veins swollen like stalks--- subsiding to wires as the beating kegs rolled outward. And in hordes--- eyes, tongues, hearts bulging at us successively, rubbery arms and legs extending and retracting like inchworms, rolling over pulsing torsos, organ after organ ballooning, shrinking, propelling the avid corpses toward us.

Tonholon would have stayed, fought. Screaming, I ran. When my foot slipped, I was dumped into an only then cooling porridge of rent muscle and pulled viscera--- eyeballs, hairtufts, genitalia, teeth, fingernails--- and, stunned, saw that Tonholon, too, had turned helplessly away--- for the other bodies, the world's debris, were rousing, as if in sympathy with the monsters we had midwived--- or in their thrall. Expressions of despair and anguish returned to faces largely loosened from the muscles that had moulded them, and with each synchronised eye-burst, tongue-eruption, heart-jolt of the master-corpses, the dropping limbs and dripping faces heaved themselves higher, painfully, with the awkwardness of the rigid.

Each of the primal animal poisons leaking into our flesh was embodied in some special organ grown by the floundering elect of the dead; but with it the corrupted bodies were so unequal to the world they had left that they could hope to work their evil only in the buoyancy of the sea (the mephitic mists around us thickened steadily). Yet in their minions, who began with jointless incoherence to circle us, the old strengths and gestures were still on tap in the gluey abacus of the nerves... did they remember hunger? Strive now to feast on faith?

But it was not mobility only which invested those damned faces again: it was the very selves they had been, still on call, riddled by worms, but *knowing*, *being* again... Tonholon could face no more, turned, ran. Struggling to rise up my hand closed desperately on a single relic out of the detritus--- a heart, a human heart, burst wide open...

It was the numbness of that hand which brought me out of my stupour, still cramped painfully on the floor and incredulous of the already blurring impression... could I possibly have risen, advanced across the room... advanced with steps slower and more laborious, as if chest-deep in a steadily congealing torrent, toward its more strictured source--- as if from dense to denser air and then into blue wax --- through elastic minutes each one longer and more viscous than the one before--- to extend a hand--- a hand which seemed hugely remote, yet parsecs nearer than those quiet waiting things--- slowly, slowly through the impeding air? The enormous effort weakened me; though time baulked more stubbornly the nearer I reached to those pallid horrors, contact seemed inevitable as gravity; and it was only as motion itself came within a fraction of suspending in a sustained crystal that I began frantically sending messages to stop that hand --- signalling to a base as remote as genesis.

Every fragment of me activated by a paroxysm of horror, I succeeded in notifying my wayward member only once it had arked with the motionless things, tugging furiously against the head which had separated, like a clasp, into three sections and fastened on me like a sucker, spilling a winterful of cold from its aborted flesh--- tugged with infinite slowness against such violence until at last it came back toward me like a magnetised bob from a lodestone. Somehow I returned out of that vortex of emotions and contractions; the cramps in my back and thighs should have convinced me of a long uninterrupted vigil in the corner... but it was not the memory of my dream-like walk, the weighted slowness, or the shrieking impact I had endured, which convinced, but the hand which clung to me now like a lump of congealed slime, its starless chill flowing down my wrist .... when I held it off like a leprous trespasser I felt its tingling tocsin of death; but when I clutched it to my chest and stomach it took none of their red vitality, but rather offered its implicit infection.

With sobs and shivers I tried to collect myself. The heads--- the bodies--- of the things on the board had not changed; none now were split or spread. Dreamlessly they lolled without eyes, mouths, or memories...

Tonholon had stopped groaning, but he had not relaxed--- wormlike twitches still lived under his skin. Supposing a major part of the night to be passed now I peered through the chinks at the moon, and found only a fraction of its course completed. A vast stretch of

animosity lay before me. The night aspired to emulate Joshua's--- and the cold, the horrors, and the intuition of horrors would tumesce harmonically.

There had been a change of a sort, I saw, returning (my legs were still half paralysed); the bed had shaken slightly and the sheet had fallen a bit. Another one of the modelled plasms came into view. I started to count them, to see whether their number would change in the night; even to start took agonising age and abasing energy; I could not carry it through. There was something about them that defied number, as though the effort of the mind to separate thing from thing were swallowed in their uniform incomprehensibility. They played the key role in this contest; their horror assured me of that. And the element of the duel was death. Did each of them embody a death? Swallow deaths? Choke on deaths?

The effect of that filthy freezing would not wear off hand or mind. I thought of pulling Tonholon away from that coverlet and dissevering him from any possible contact with the white things, but I was afraid to call on the rebel hand--- it might be charged with other principles now. In any case I no longer trusted in my own strength, nor in the face of forms.

The contest, too, might be affected. What was it? Was he undergoing every minute what I had undergone for so grossly swollen an instant? If what the woman had said was true (I trusted nothing in that house) surely my recollection of the world's charnel would have filled the room with deaths, more than met the quota. To summon more memories of Tonholon's relentless, incredible researches might increase the sum, probably needlessly, perhaps dangerously; yet memories have a lambent sort of life to them, and I strove to stifle mine.

It was ironic that the man whose mere humanity dared the ultimate and megascopic should here be locked in enervate contest with some undefinable morsels of our own flesh--- the man who had sounded the great depths, the arteries of outer darkness, to find the pivot on which the grinding bulk of the universe turns--- and chock it. I had followed less from grandiose ambition than in fascination of such grit--- and such vision; not a sharer, but a bearer. Where I would not follow he had gone alone. His return denoted merely that the interdict corridor tested was nugatory or terminal. He scoured all wings of time, the flat and oblique barracks of space; it is index of the weakness of language that I must say he came back defeated from each attempt, because the stupendous strength each assault required could not brook a fibre of debility, capacity to yield or break. He returned still whole and still aware that the focus of his determination was yet to come. Now, by the mere fact of his presence, he was notifying me that, whatever the outcome, this alone was the route, the aperture out of this cause-barbed matrix... the long- sought hatch of escape. Failure here--- a trapdoor back into the dark and festering maze of our wanderings--- meant simply a longer, more circuitous course back to this very spot and throe.

It was hideous to me. But then the great charnel-continent had been hideous; and the secret cells beneath basalt pyramids, where the skeletons of the mighty were preserved upright, held in place by tendons teased off living, torpid victims whose lives were passed chained to the far side of the grilles their flesh twined away from like vines--- until a sliver of meat, glowing like a dead thing afloat, could be carried up from the caskets of dark millenia and planted with exacting care and ritual technicality at the precise midpoint of the spine, to grow again, under a daily refreshment of blood, spread like a mould across the desolate bones and resume the time it had forsworn long before, when the dust of the present had not begun to fall ... hideous the impassivity of those servers of the great worms in frosted marshes as they skewered unimprinted children and cast them down like sprats for the creatures which floundered below the cliffs, lifted setate heads to probe and pierce the tiny bodies with deadly echoes; drawn up again flaccid as sponges, they ululated like nightbirds while the worms below writhed as if gorged and ricocheted their vicious vocables from the moon... all had led to nuclei beyond the flesh; Tonholon had sounded them all.

And all, in their turn, had led back inwards again, as if the piston-curves of time and space incarcerated too all that made us more than pulp and pulse. Guided by some incorruptible gnosis and doubly fortified with the strength born of ultimate desperation he had gone on--- ready to go for ever--- to escape all the for evers of light and darkness.

And yet... and yet... the woman said... "He did tempt me... one's thoughts flow like tears from the eyes of the serpent-brain... and the serpent lies, always lies..." That long snake that slept along his spine with its head in his skull, placid beneath the knotted dreams of man, the lusts of the ape... from which of these did his gnosis come? From which his strength? And from which--- his conviction? Had the whole epic been a shadow-play--- the underside of a joke?

Thin cylinders of moonlight fell through, minting oboli on the walls. Their eaten profiles reminded me of persons known and dead. I had not intended to give in to memory and strove to stop it now, squeeze shut the steady flow of coloured energy to eyes, ears, tongue, and a dozen more recondite wounds. My eyes were scabs; the brain behind them a scalloped ache. It is harder by volition to halt the brain than to lock the heart. Systematically I tore away passion, aim, judgment--- all those grudging parasites--- and devolved wriggling to a naked core of being...

I had only one source of anxiety--- the regular, reverberant echo below me, varying just enough from time to time in rhythm to convince me I was not alone. Otherwise I was innocent of fears or sensations; arms across chest I lay lightly as pumice on foam, my body sprawled out at the feet of my heedless self. Beyond that was the insulation of ignorance.

Still there were rich landscapes and glittering dioramas frozen in motion, clear enough in their own red degrees, within the ambit of my perception. A long blur of moving creatures was resolved into an infinitely telescoping body, each phase solid and apart; details of one filled the interstices of another, so they coexisted in, and with byzantine mass filled, the limited space. Somewhere in each gem-collage a distinctive colour or diagnostic shape was unlidded--- a moody porphyry, aloof pearl, Tyrian voluptuousness--- to reveal the whole for what it was: the fabric of memory; altogether, the tapestry of my past life. But if I attempted to probe any one association with my thought, or evoke into warm life the frigid images embedded there, it faded at once, grew sullen; if I persisted, crumbled to a dazzling powder which sleeted quickly through my retina and was gone. As long as they were unquestioned, untampered with, they stood intact; I preferred to leave them so...

... Except one, which was so hideously grotesque that I shouldered my mind into it roughly and on design, hoping its purulent scarlets and morbid ebonies, like an extraneous growth on the vivid boxwork of my being, would splinter likewise. But it was more substantial, more bruising than bruised, and rather than ridding myself of its audacious blot I found it clinging adhesively to my efforts, involving me more deeply in an unemotional odyssey independent of the other, more flamboyant tableaux. Behind me in the spumy cabinet of my mind I left my will in cold paralysis...

... And drowned in metallic ink. Come now into forward time I could move mechanically, crawling or dragging some flame or fragment of my self through endless slimy caverns, the essential factors of my being waiting for me somewhere in the future, somewhere across my course--- just as I (here and now) have the strength to lift one or both arms, while the will for such an act remains encapsuled somewhere ahead. The impulses needed to move my arms or legs, fill my lungs, dilate my veins with horror, or tremble my thews with hope, were not with me then, nor the ability to feel handicap nor hindrance, struggle or peace. The drive which kept me on my snaillike course was a blind one indeed, part of the process which would bring me to one being again: I *was*--- but stretched dissected across a rack of time as well as space.

Eyeless, I was in darkness; oblivious to space, in an infinity; eon-ignorant, void of pulse or hunger. The matrix I toiled over was itself alive, active, furnished with tentacles, palps, tongues--- flexible members which undulated under me, twined to clasp or mesh me, or push and flail me on the ever more difficult road. At times the mass of them like a wheatfield maddened with wind would wash me forward with great oceanic swells; at others the horde dissolved into chaotic rips, tossing me with flicking ends and heavy coils to and fro in the vertigo of purposelessness. Whenever freed I resumed my unthinking direction helpless as a satellite, taking advantage of their entwinements and caresses to thrust myself onward and up, rebounding from their long---almost cognisant--- strokes.

Viscous tides flowed along or rained against or with me, raising oily retarded ripples as I breasted them; other things, discrete and mobile beings, came blundering through the gorgonian pelt, colliding at times and routing me from my automatic course; at others parallelling mine --- even at times ploughing an open path before me.

Somewhere at the end of that long catacomb, before its grade grew too steep to climb, out of the reach of these working members, was the I in which moved that now past, resorbed fraction of my self.... a placid envelope of balance and unity where all the factors which had struggled, each in its various plane, came to meet and, meeting, completed and silenced one another--- cruelty with love, heat with cold, pain with oblivion. Met as template with cast, consuming, superseding--- was this a metaphor of my whole life--- a subliminal summary?

Then the secret crypt was found; the cathartic relief of fusing each flagging fragment of my self into the whole, and the multi-sharded past hung around me crystallised, eradicable at will. Only this one terrifying nightmare, this single aspect of the long journey to wholeness, which I wished to demolish, withstood me; and since any suggestion of fear or uncertainty made me more acutely aware of that neighboring clangour which at times slowed, sped, was nearer, deeper, more hollow--- like some massive nibbling or gnawing approaching me through the seemingly buoyant ground of my quiet rest--- I left it alone and even attempted to cover it over in thought with the amber and carmine grains, the cobalt and violet lattices or the other, more agreeable experiences, in whose vague unfocussed beauty I was safe from memory or fear. Sealing eyes and ears I burrowed into the black sponge on the underface of my mind, though the vibration of my whole body kept me bound to a buried rumble--- which I decided at last was the unfaded echoing of a colossal gong struck at the beginning of time, to which every living heart became attuned and which now rang on outside rather than within me....

Still, I waxed. From somewhere scintillant tesserae were spiralling inward to magnify this soft core I was willing to remain; a source of power fed the self in this prone body down a long zigzag shaft of heady light. Squibs which might have stormed from her mirror back into Medusa's eyes and transformed her too into glittering crystal, every organ an inverted geode, came riddling me, phospherescent strength which had some promise or some future in it--- which I kept my mind from touching.

In fact, reinforced by this beryl circulation I persuaded myself that I could replace the dangerous and combustible intaglios of memory with new models of my own devising, free and permanent reflections of my own will. I could imagine colours more glorious than the real, morphologies more intricate and symmetrical--- and meaningful--- than the heritage of my brain; the emotions which were the schema of each of these vistas were still alive and assertive in me, could be given an unbridled liberation... I could raise up to new life and having done so be rid of any stains or apprehensions (even though there was a seed of fear in the thought, as a seed lurked in each of the condemned panoramas and would undoubtedly lurk in each of the new), unlatch the puppet-strings of time. (The continual drumming reminded me that time had not yet stopped.)

Suddenly that drumming, the flood of coruscations, the rattle of thoughts were split by a staggering starburst of something that was more than light--- the clear revelation of free nescience, the ultimate estate of laggard humanity. For a moment every aspect of being was raised to an infinite magnitude, overflowing the whole universe and penetrating a transcendence wholly new and wholly supernal. Its cool ecstasy had no sooner struck me than it was gone; desperately I struggled again and again, so anxiously that my body scrabbled as hard as my mind to regain that absolute, consummating moment. All my hesitations, thronging in again, were shoved away; fitful as a beached octopus I slashed in all directions, and the exquisite dioramas of my life went crashing into glittering ruin, ignored by me avid now for what I knew really to exist--- the foundation of all vision... but their hailing shards lanced through my mind like glass slivers, and the pain distracted me again; there was a shift, an unsettling, a wrench that quickly riveted through every cell of brain and body. The drumming boomed gigantically, steadily, louder and stronger; a whirlpool was opening above my head, catching skin, bone, the feeling cerebrum... a drainspout piped into my brain, and my fragile sense of balance flowed away... stones formed on eyes, nose, chest, belly; lead precipitated out in my tissues... weight fell across me like an avalanche of gravel, crushing and burying me, impelling me blindly down out of the crypt of peace... driving me down headlong through layers of confining whey, which bellied--- yielded--- burst! With the ringing of shocked seabeds tearing through me I was wrung, wheeled, and squeezed, my head pincered by menhirs until my kneaded brain was rendered to a warm phlegm of iris flakes, a sevenfold broth where light and sound were reduced to their undifferentiated ground, and thought itself dissolved--- then I was propelled headlong into a bank of frost, where the massive loads which had fallen on me sank in mercilessly while I grasped everywhere over a rasp of frigid, urticating felt for some hospitable hold.

Two spikes of jagged ice hammered upward through my nostrils and splintered, their razors spinning in my chest, lacerating in my throat the membrane which had so long confined a naked scream. It ploughed up the soft tissues of my mouth and ears, twisted out of me from foot to head.

Tightly as I clenched my eyelids, brands of blazing erubescence came smouldering through and went to work like blowtorches on the soft gel inside my skull. Vipers of pain put hungry jaws on my belly, and a miasma of obverse odours, like a strand of baked slime, a marsh of clotting blood, scraped mordantly at my palate... I swallowed great sloughs of fleshed-out sulphur and osmium....

The irrupted drumming now had ceased, though I felt its backwash in my chest. But the hot pellets of vocables which came storming around me now ebbed and burned in like cycle. The same sandy grit that my scream left in my throat cascaded now down my ears; I was gibbeted upward by my feet and suspended there, blood ballasting my head, pain being sewed on me like a robe by a fiend with a needle of fury. More swiftly whirlpooling, the world evaded my desperate clawing.

And they were around me again. Primed for another threescore and ten, the essence of drooling apes and twining asps bound me into the musty web of time and space again, intimate as executioner with victim. The corroded filaments of their desires fingered over my brain and crept into familiar sockets, reopening old sensations like raw wounds... and again I was one with the narwhal-tusked ribbonworm of evolution, whose loose ends scraped on the blades of rising mountains--- taut again with the tetanic tropias of metamorphosis.

Even had I been able, by a supreme feat of detachment, to withdraw myself from the burgeoning physical agony and the coldly repellent embrace of the lower selves (only now did I notice that I had been free of them during the last resting phase), other minds remained beyond, not assimilable with my own but impinging on it with sparks of pain and death (equal to those brought back by the other mingling mes of exile and shame)--- throbs of hate and spouts of violence--- their adventitious thoughts baptising me with the black liquors and buzzing acids that flowed along and over the road I could once more see ahead of me. Globes hairy with fire churned into my aura like contrary spindles, macerating it; they stood at varying distances watching me, like semaphores of the jousts to come, reminding me, in their blindness, impotence, and emptiness, of what I had again become. The white-clad bodies coagulated around red intensities of will like the slime a threatened slug throws out upon its skin... and I stood in a hallway of twisted mirrors where my elis of interrogation were rebounded stripped to the shrill nonsense that they were.

I had seen it all many--- infinitely many--- times before, always the same. That awareness was granted only for an instant; following that hard swift impact the glow of triboluminescence boiled over my brain; I knew myself the toy of demons for another age, and, multiplied, vivisected, broadcast again, was off to the stark green Alamut where long labour on adamantine medium had perfected the most complex, inventive, and imperishable garden of torments... sensing wisdom and hope gutter in the upwelling thunderheads of anangke and flesh.

Toward morning another of the whitish things spawned and found food. Something scraped along the hallway and scratched beyond the light's protective ring; the moonlight had been scribbling messages on the walls, but withdrew at the sound.

I realised the first kindling of dawn had come, and looked expectantly at the old lamp by the door. Incredulously I saw that it had gone out; the blue wraith departed--- shadow sat there looking back at me. Tense as a cliff-hanger I turned to the bed and tore back the sheet. Tonholon's body had been hollowed to

the waist; above it, however wasted, the skin still packaged flesh and blood. I slid back one eyelid. Beneath, unpainted now, the surface was wrinkled and fissured as a brain. But the body, as I did so, writhed and moaned.

"The place reeks of life." Her voice was flat; though the room was now alight she was still obscure. I felt it had filled with ashes. "Well, there is a pit in the cellar for the leftovers---"

I choked a long time assembling an answer. "Life?... Life has been hauled inside out here. That a man, any man, can come so far, endure so much, and still be denied the ultimate boon... the universe is a maze of criscrossing futilities--- I recognise that--- but to say that there is nothing else--- no escape hatch from this one--- but an eternal flatworm circling in a blind and burning maze--- that is no ordeal--- not even death, not destruction--- it's hyperdeath, an endless, sensory, convulsive dying, a moment-by-moment-for-ever crushing of razor jaws... a never-ending ending! It's impossible; it makes life and death and liberation impossible! This body hangs like a sounding lead, a corpse-weight, from not just my future but from the figurehead of time! The lottery of the stars is stacked! I'm going to --- going to burn his body in one of the other lamps, join it with the essence---"

She shrugged. "They give off no heat, as you saw. They consume nothing. They burn neither forward nor backward. Only *this* could be his... he circled it as a match circles a wick--- and went out."

I sank to the floor, dropping head in hands --- shaking, reminded that one of them was no longer my own. Her words kept swelling in my ear canals like spiny puffers.

"I warned you; warned them all; the cosmos is a written warning. I warned you and I warned him, week after week; warned him from a distance by dreams, and at hand by mouth. This is an ordeal into which a man goes to find only that he is not man but multitude, not a speaker but a parliament. Unless there is somewhere a guide or king, who has trained each individual member of his being for the battle it must fight, and, not stopping there, exacted obedience from each of his discrete minions--- no concerted effort is possible. A grain of sand will not hold your foot... a man must know himself fibre by fibre, impulse by atom. He who comes out an inefficient general of his own drives, thoughts, currents, cravings, comes out fragmented, lost."

"No one in the sun-muck knew so better than Tonholon."

"But only he can win through who has marshalled his forces by individual specialty. He must know exactly how and in what guise the powers are assembled, and how they direct their assaults; *then* he must study his own resources and seek out those which are pseudonymous, disloyal, defenceless. He must know there are pieces of him as opposed to the forces of the known as ths enemies to himself; pieces as indifferent to this universe as the powers he challenges; pieces which can abnegate the abnegators... His own must meet and interdigitate the lure or urge directed toward itself, fit as template to matrix, that there may be a mutual extinction--- and dangling scraps of matter fly to nothingness... but the truth remains that so few know how much of the whole corpus of existence they contain within themselves--- how far the dim outposts of being reach into their own circumscribed frames--- how much likeness, and oneness, welds together the disparate gewgas of the universe.

"It is only the papillae of the archetypes that you rub across... no time seeps through our dimensions from their wills; they leak rather into our heat minutely, like nails through a bed. The impetus our chiral action adds to this continuum is as foreign to them as the taste of elecampane to you; you must drop the gloves of line to grapple with them ... otherwise their random force will gnaw through your human aspect and triumph, leaving you like a piece of meat chewed over by a throatless dog and left to lie. Like the babble of bats in a monochrome moon there is no sensory battle; but since flesh owes its coherence only to the skeleton of the mind, it is shorn away whenever a match is successfully made--- when each projectile is locked into a death-struggle and blinks out--- as if you cut off handfuls of yourself to cast at your assailants. If you lose, it is twisted into new flesh, more in keeping with the rhythm of the overpowering potters. Then mere weight, it hauls its victim deeper into the profounds of change and age... there will be changes here that you will never want to see, beside which these are nothing, as the time-drive contests timelessness... it is for you, not his sake --- he is nothing now or again--- that I tell you to drop what is left of him in the pit.

"Every approach to them retards your own sense of time; you feel the universe braking to a stop around you, meet the caress of incomparable horror, and retire, never to be whole again--- in this life or any other."

"So my hand," I said dully, "my hand has been dipped into Lethe to leave my soul and body envious..."

"The horror you recall is your mind's euphemism, imaging your friction with the archetype. You of course were enough to bind *him* into failure, crossing his own manoeuvres; to *them* it is all the same; some are more of a myriad than others; there may be three or four selves in one flimsy body; *they* answer them all. So you joined his battle. Some factor of yourself--- life-urge, death-urge, star-alignment, resonance--- crossed with them and was pinioned in their vortex. Your lust for liberation damned you both. It is no small thing to pit yourself against the universe--- to flail at leviathan with fingernails; you could do no more though crowned with a torc of galaxies... You must throw those gutless memories and emotions into their chewing maws as distracting sacrifices, while blotting out the real self piece by piece. But so many feel that those very cysts are the jewels they must carry through. It is a universe of the stumbling blind..."

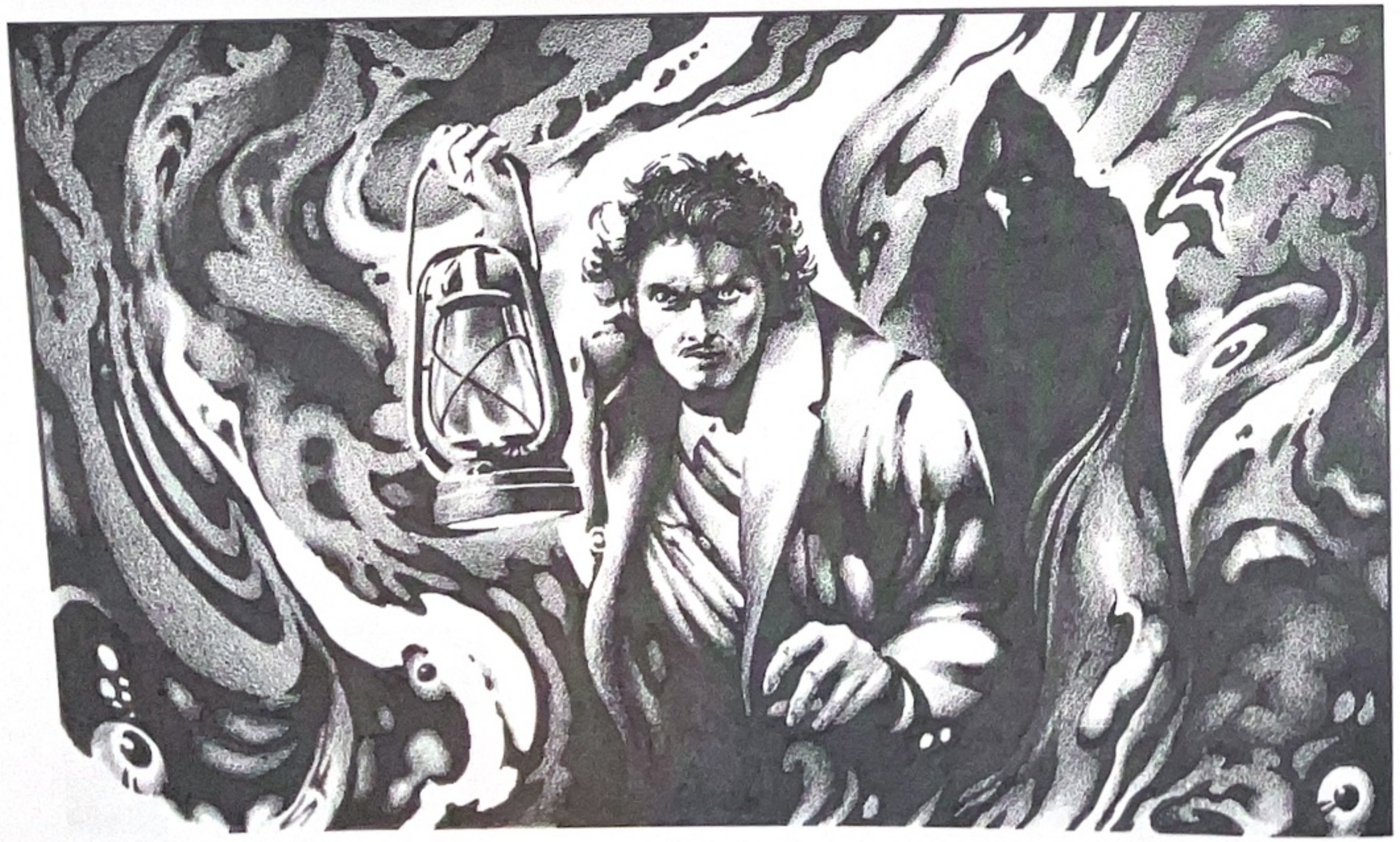
"Tonholon had no such delusions. He knew the course and the means. He tested every mode of death, the hell of the flesh, the heaven of oblivion before rebirth--- went from the zenith to the nadir of man-meaning. If he is too bloated to pass through the only exit from this universe then so is everyone---"

"Five," she reminded me, deafeningly quiet. "The onus of the eternal battle is too simple ever to be remembered. That sudden fusion of knowledge and nescience, self-completion and self-abnegation, which you grasp, only in concept, at the midpoint between death and birth, just before the cobbled wheel rolls on--- the pivot between heaven and hell, the madstone in the dragon's brain--- is eternal. Timeless, unbodied, it can be known only before and afterwards; it neither fills nor lasts. Wherever time resumes the eternal is gone. You have known it--- he has known it--- and you reached for it, desired it, were foolish enough to desire--- to yearn--- and not to match, to cancel the desire, the urge. And so you sank like stone... and sinking, sit..."

The sunlight was blackening in my eyes. "Then each point of the trident ends in a downward-facing barb... the outer dragon truly swallows the world. His ordeal is as nothing compared to mine, now, left to face light and life with new knowledge of their triple hopelessness."

"In the end..." she was leaving me, "a wick for eternity is no less circumscribed than a body, and perhaps equally contorted. Whether you are a chain or a bead upon the chain is a difference of shape, no more. A flame is the prison-cell of fire..."

They say men laugh as they leap into the black abyss; but I stood silent as the empty gulf bucked up and swallowed me.



The Parasite

I fell asleep in a knotted grove, with huge blue blossoms bobbing over my head, as the late afternoon mist filled that canopied valley. Exhaustion brought quick oblivion, as I had been searching for a track through this little-crossed valley many days --- some key to the Thisphene Pass through to Lasukhis --- but had found myself faced everywhere with insurmountable cliffs.

But from a tangle of vulture-like dreams I soon emerged, though just to that platform between earth and the deep on which the stone-weighted body knows only that it sleeps. The lethal flowers of my dreams bore fruit: I could not say what, struggling for consciousness and clarity; I sensed the passage of the day and vaguely pulled myself out of the pit with the intense blurred blue of the flowers above me. This looseness, the unwillingness of my body to give me the helm again, flushed me with fears that those blue blossoms I had unwittingly taken refuge under were perhaps some kin of the deadly upas, or that some greater menace lay with or around them. Yet I could not find my senses; my skin bloated hollowly over windy gulfs.

Were those blue globes the swollen glimmering orbs of an elephantine snail? They wavered over me on their slimy stalks. I cringed, waiting for the crushing passage of the titan slug that bore them. There was the menace of a mountain on my left hand. I strove to raise my head, but could not. There was the menace, perhaps, of a leech along my thigh, capable of sucking out bones or entrails. But it was huge --- I grappled, in the absence of eyes, with some congealing black embryo which seemed to threaten me from an indefinable quarter. Still the quality of menace had reached me: it was imminent, and my dreams were not its allies, but its cohorts.

To the pricking of thorny pain in my head I somehow staggered up, grasping for branches. Huge onyx seas opened miles beneath me, and my body had increased by the weight of the world. For a while I reeled dizzily over this abyss, and then dragged myself forward, wormlike perhaps, through strangely yawning, then contracting, yellow-green burrows, on the tail of the sun. Had I picked up the burden of mankind's iniquity? The weight was beyond the limits of my heart, or of the earth, which seemed to give way beneath my feet; I sensed a continual descent, past the writhing roots of trees and through the heavy veins of jewels beyond human delving, down to the bubbling black mud of the earth-egg.

By prayers I pulled myself out of the chaos. The world slowly wavered into focus: and my shapeless dread coagulated into clarity abruptly as I realised that there was indeed a heavy object against my left side --- something which had come to cover me in my sleep. I tried to brush the tunnels from my eyes, and the deep arcades of the Thimahos jungles settled into their familiar frieze. But I was lost; I could not recognise the misty shelter. I *had* wandered delirious, and lost that one tenuous trace of a trail that I had found. Still I seemed to have found the cords to my arms and legs again. My head obeyed flaccidly; I looked down --- and my consciousness, so valiantly recovered, nearly fled again; the pain and horror which had been waiting outside me until that moment threatened to take its place entirely.

A warty slug clutched me. It was fixed leech-like to my side; I had carried it from that horrible grove, reeling under its weight. I staggered in circles, gasping, my breath like metal. I groped for the staff I had been carrying, but my madness had not brought it; I scrabbled on the ground for a stone, a branch, any weapon, only to find that when I beat the thing its crust protected it, and that I harmed only myself. I had no knife, and found no sharp edge. When after a long, hysterical session of beating and clubbing I finally conquered my nausea just enough to feel over its waxy surface, I found that its many appendages were covered with the same hard shell which secured its body from any but a violent thrust by blade or point at its sutures.

I kept up a hopeless assault, reduced to bleeding fists, until, covered with self-inflicted wounds, I dropped to the grass again, my last delirious hope being that it would leave me as it had come.

When I woke near sunset my sleeping nightmare dimmed into fact. I was still prey to this clutching incubus.

If I say I sat through that moonless night, in the flare of all the unknown sounds of the Thimahos mountains, at the trunk of a giant ceiba with my left hand extended the entire night so as to avoid contact with the thing, and stared into the darkness without consciousness or movement, I say all I need to.

Then the next morning brought the horror to my hearth. Fever still owned me, but was gradually deserting; I could walk, was aware of ravenous hunger, sandy thirst, and obsessed with the overpowering need for moving --- never so much as after my no more dispassionate but more detailed examination of the thing I carried.

It was a trilobitoid creature which had wrapped two sticky tentacles entirely around my chest, and driven a thin proboscis into my skin on level with my heart. A thick cushion of slimy flesh covered that fragile syphon, and the pain was nothing compared to the wretching loathing with which the warty grey creature blistered me. Its body stretched from my armpit to my thigh; it clung along my side with shorter furnishings whose hooked terminals drove into my flesh, and the gnats were already condensed around the files of blood they opened. Its broad, flat, shielded head, beneath my arm --- its features fortunately invisible, but pressed against my skin, so that my rasped senses were not spared even those --- joined a thick, ribbed thorax which curved to a blunt shield of a tail, that buckled over the joint of my thigh.

I took a few steps, adjusting to the balance of its bulk, struggling with the rebellion of my own stomach. I gathered up my linen robe, a half-filled gourd, and found fruit. The fruit of this valley so far uncovered had been of the most unappealing kind --- the long bubbly fingers of the smelly boukout, an acrid purple cashew and soggy craboo; opening the one ripe blood-orange I had found I discovered it entirely hollowed out by a coiled green grub; and the ground only gave ramps and the speckled allium. The fruit I found now was unfamiliar --- spawned in a valley which had spawned this abortion --- but nevertheless irresistible. No threat of death or worse affliction could hold me now; my teeth even tore the strange rinds with a special thrill, avid after the chance of extinction.

I found a staff and walked on. The jungles --- ceiba, palm, and seal tree crocheted with furry lianas --- were impassible, so I kept close to the hem of the cliffs, and measured my daily progress in no more than a league or two. The staff I carried continually in my left hand, to keep the arm outward and avoid contact with the thing; within a few days my arm was stiffened and lost sensation. Rather than lose it as well I dropped it over the creature's back. Such rhythmic contact with its hide never, even with the midden of days, failed to send a shower of prickles over my spine.

My pack of dried meat had been left behind; I had no recourse but to continue to eat the valley's produce. Water was of course abundant, though invariably occupied. The nectar of the bombax just after dawn brought momentary relief and relative pleasure. At no time, however, could I avoid recognising that I was simply passing my fare to the bloat of that oneirogene monster. That proboscis, for instance, quivered to such degree that I felt it humming in my flesh! There was unquestionably a pulse to it, and the nausea this suggestion aroused was nearly my end. But there was no question, surprising as it was, as to the result: I did not lose vitality even after this horrible (apparent) suction had been long continued.

Yet periods of dreaminess, hazy moods, became more pronounced; some of the visions actually took the niche of memory, and survived unexpected lengths of time into my waking. So time and again I strayed from what I felt to be the correct path and found myself splashing through slime-blanketed pools whose green bones were dappled by the fainting sun, sometimes caught in catacombs of forest gloom with tarantulas and millipedes toiling over my feet --- midnight dark at noon. Always there was that sense of life crawling in its diverse fragments underneath the thick slabs of vegetation; always the sudden ripple of terror at the thought of what might lie in the centre of this natural maze.

But darkness ended search after search; and knowing the strength my hallucinations had acquired, when I first found that upward path with its clear promise of the pass above, I hardly dared believe that its cold stone would survive five minutes. But the crystal drip of time alone brought a second sunrise to that day: it was the Thisphene Pass!

I packed fruit, and filled the gourd. It occurred to me (since I dealt with the thing now as a man does with any well-settled cancer) that this creature of a tropical valley might not long survive in the chilly heights of the mountains. So encouraged, I struck out on the steep mountain trail with a vigour so long absent as to be thought vanished. In a day's time I had risen above the level of the valley's choking growth, though because of the constant hindrance of the burden at my side my progress involved half or less the distance I could normally have expected. Through the following days this hope was still the strength my muscles failed to have; and pulled me, like a lodestone, toward the sun-glinting snowbanks high overhead.

The air grew colder; the gleam of snow and ice crystallised as I rose. The path tilted sharply upward, and thin streams of melt water broke across it in shocks.

At length I reached a point at which a cleared path progressed through shorn banks of year-old snow, and knew that a patrol was within reach. Perhaps there would be a surgeon, or a priest; at any rate I would have help and shelter until I could reach one. As this thought arose I forced myself to face the fact that I was on the lip of exhaustion.

At last I reached the high summit, the white sweep, marbled with lichen, spilling away on each side. Across the harsh crops I saw the blue-black walls of Lasukhis in its lofty valley.

But the pass was marked by a stone tower, and men in heavy furs were waiting as I came up. I had hated to share what little warmth I could muster in the same linen with the parasite, but could not adequately cover myself without draping it; now the eyes of the guards fell upon this massive bulge in my robe, my torn feet, my contorted face.

I tried to pass with a word, but without one they pulled my robe from me. In the slow seconds which succeeded this I realised that the disgust in their faces was not compounded with surprise; this was the real horror which smashed all hope.

They were quite brief. "Go back down."

"Can't you help me get rid of this thing? It is driving me mad." They seemed not to understand the words; had my long solitude blunted my speech? But this was not enough to explain it; there was some difficulty with my words, less as though they were long unused than that they were newly acquired.

But they understood the import. "No."

"Do you have a knife? A sword? Anything which will cut me free of this tumour? even if it kills me doing so."

"No."

Their faces were unquestioningly firm. "Go back." One emphasised this repeated command with a brass-bossed cudgel. His threat was lost on me, but when I tried to argue he wavered indistinctly. The sea-mutter of my thoughts betrayed me. Somehow I found myself picking my way back down through the slimy lichens. Carefully as I had marked the path on my ascent, I could not have described a single feature on my return. I snivelled memories of the statuary in Korakhis, or the manuscripts of Hedet, with their eidola half-human, half-bestial, and questioned the difference.

I wondered whether my future until death did not perhaps wait in the nearest market

place, where all freaks and cripples expose their deformities --- glittering pointillate crystals hemming rose-pink broths, a flat-faced head with a gaping reddish hole opening squarely on a cringeing brain, shrivelled limbs, extracted tongues, a man with loose boneless arms like an octopus which he twined around passers-by imploringly --- steeping in my own horrors.

For a league I walked through an utter vacuum --- with enormous dark montane masses on each horizon. But when I approached one--- and I sought out each --- it turned into a slug-like sucking monster and I had to flee spinelessly across the nothingness.

But life and matter settled out again. I could not remember how far I had come, but I had lost the position of the earlier found path. The vegetation of that uninhabited valley was strikingly quick of growth; to pass a spot passed only a week before was to pass a spot bearing no resemblance to any point previously passed. Flowers burst to armspread widths overnight, then fell; slick, sectioned shrubs were transformed by hours from shoots, to spears, to kerbs.

I should not say I wandered, since I sought nothing; but I could not bear to sleep a second night on a spot sullied with one touch. I had to keep moving. I never felt, after bathing in the streams, that I was clean. The water certainly had no effect on the grey thing. Although there was actually no scarcity of food, I knew that I grew weak, plagued with constant disorder, seeing no face --- and daring no reflection in the water; and never feeling myself alone.

My steps then compassed many days. An avenue of escape hovered in front of me now and then, but it was either a mirage or else my mind was past its use. Never, in all this time, did I see any other animal staggering under a parasite like the one I bore. In the swampier regions of the valley, however, early in the mornings and when eaten by the evening shadows, I heard disturbing rustlings and flounderings in the clotted undergrowth. At times, worse noises came, but, ignorant of the fauna, I could never be certain whether they were the warnings of unknown birds, or distant screams. I could no longer stand the thought of being seen by others, aware of the horrible and only conceivable outcome of any human encounter.

The disease I lived became more commanding. At times I would come on views and sights I could virtually remember, yet the course of my wandering had never touched on them. It was as though there were two valleys, or perhaps five or a dozen, each a mirror image of the first, in linear succession away from the birthpoint which I could only flee outward.

But I reached one conviction --- an act

increasingly difficult with the transfer of my mind to bubbling mud and edging scum. I was sure the parasite was changing in some way. Perhaps it was only now becoming active, but slight (though never undetectable in every fibre of my body) movements on its part, shifting of its cleated legs, perhaps a low shiver running through its body, the sense of increased pulsation in that horrible beak which punctured my chest, all convinced me that, if nothing worse, my days were numbered. With helpless rising of the gorge I observed one morning the cracking of the huge crust down its back, and its sloughing off, as the creature moulted --- an indubitable index of growth.

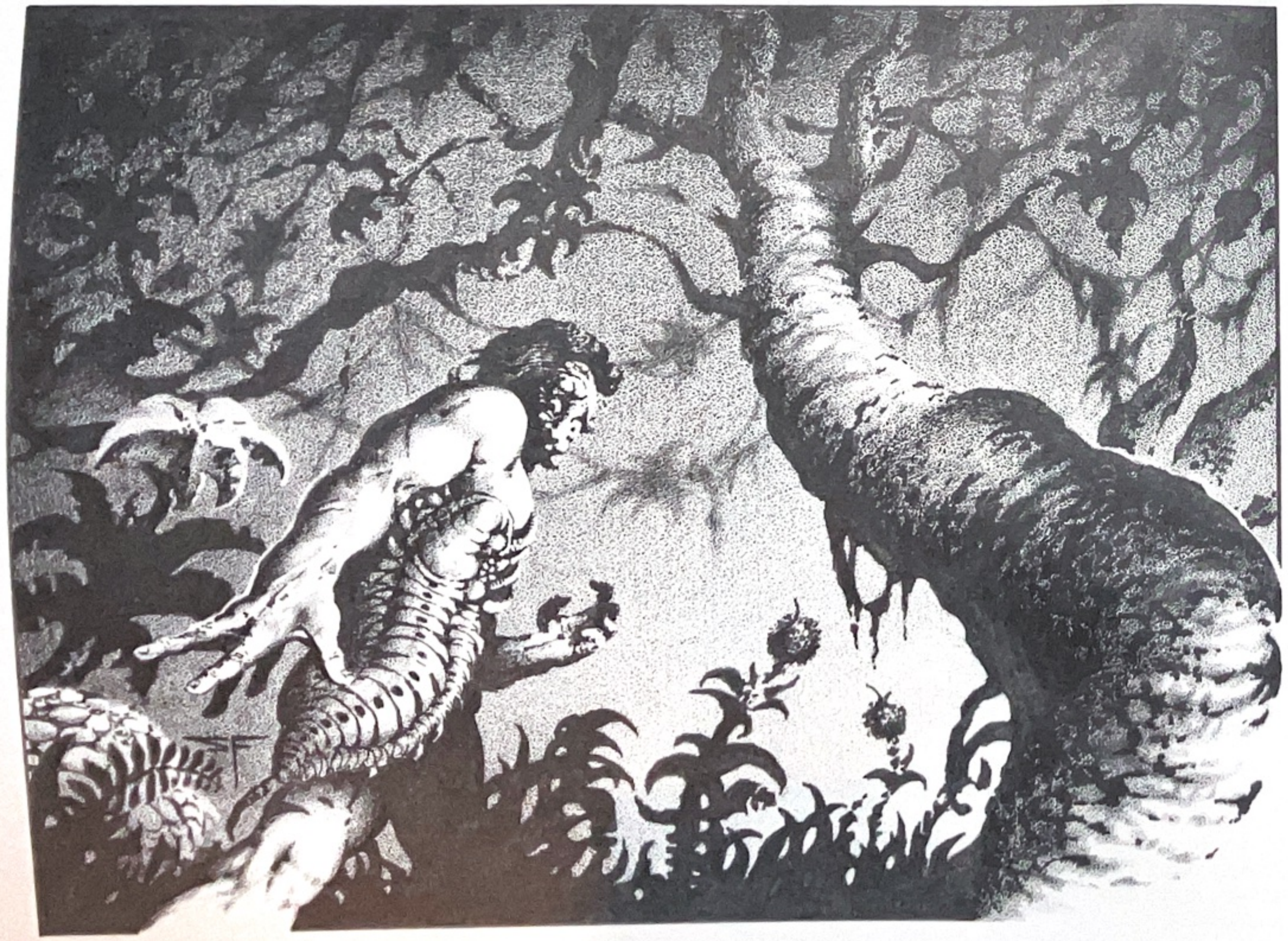
Then again that tantalising hallucination came --- of a low pass above some grassy hills. It pencilled onward and upward into thin stands of timber. The first thrill of escape was dull, but I turned to the trail automatically, prepared for the painful perception of its evaporation.

But as I began the ascent a movement in the parasite halted me. Another sharp tube suddenly pierced my body beside the first, stabbing new pain into my numbness. Another slimy cushion covered it --- and a heavy palpitation followed by a tremour which crackled the creature's crust, shook me to the ground.

That faint must have lasted three days, from the growth I found waking.

And waking, I knew instantly what had happened, and what was to happen. Unwrapping my tentacles from the sleeping body, withdrawing the useless tubes, I fell away from it. As I released my hold the body woke, sprang up from me, and glared at me with such concentrated malice that I curled beneath its fire. Then it turned and ran up the path of egress.

I folded my tentacles beneath the shell, and burrowed down into the moist soil to wait for the arrival of another man, that I should gain again a body.



What Breeds About Her Heart

Midway across the green headland, bloodied then by a sunset rich with the suicide of mountains, she heard the labrador whimper and turned to see it collapse in the act of launching at her; silent wide mouth gnawing, twisted into a convulsive vise with bones strutting from skin which had been supplely-muscled moments before; the sheen of its eyes and its tongue dripped out together. The acute intensity with which she watched this hybrid ploy of lust and death corrected nothing, though the carcass did not so much sink as set into immobility.

"In the flesh!" Her face was too fixed in calculation to grant a grin, but there was a powerful upthrust in her heartbeats. She confirmed its deformity and death, and swiftly started back across the boulder-dotted headland, broken as it was by uptilted shelves of crystal-ridden stone.

When she crossed what would have seemed the limit of a burn had it not been expressed in the blackness of crumbling stone she did stop, as if preening over a fallen enemy. There were three circles of this blasted rock, centred serially on her cottage. A week earlier the crystals in those stones, aligned not with the natural grain of the rock but rather with the grain of space as she combed it, had burst out everywhere, an efflorescence of brilliants, crusting over the accustomed rubble with the ransom of unearthly kings, giving up to her all the beauty its weathered antiquity possessed. Her garden wall was ridged over with effective diamonds; hard bouquets of amber and rosebud quartzes rippled with the contours of her land; she had sought it, thought it, measured it everywhere --- but never in such glorious, gemstill tones. From that dawn she had risen to find the triple tiara, its utmost circuit a full seven hundred feet from her hearth, the spot where she had slept that night, had willed and pulled --- and its objective reality, its immortal glimmering, had convinced and reinforced her, directed her determination.

But within a few days her hoard of ornamented stone crumbled to black cinder, fragile as charcoal and as empty of light; even the stones beneath had starved out of their crystal seeds. At first it made her pause, but it mattered only slightly, because it had been born from the seal of the power she had known winging within her, had now flexed; she knew she would join in due course the spheres of her power to an obedient time.

Her cottage stood on a headland carpeted lushly with mosses and ferns, and she had thought to test the sea first. Its whey-heavy ripples had skewed in to her in defiance of the moon (though it was the moon she used) but there was nothing in it, not even the growl of a storm, she could preserve and grow on. So it had come --- if not in the early greening of the moss-fabric, which was possible --- in the fairy-ring of mineral fire; and again, to her delight, the day after she sang and wove, the garden, despite the greyness of a late, miserly spring, had erupted at her an exuberance of fresh leaf and blossom.

Roses, foxgloves, lilacs, hollyhocks --- after the weak, frost-calendared renascence of the tulips and hyacinths --- had opened such tall, ornate, and abundantly pigmented calices around her that it was as if she moved through a straining mass of sensuous flesh, headily perfumed, lavishly caparisoned, and she served to its questing as the sun which was itself occulted by indifferent clouds. It exalted her; she had conjured it, invoked it, but never expected to find it coming through the simple sweetness of her garden any more than in the glitter of inert gemstones.

And when she had risen to find the garden, too, exhausted by its brief excess, its interlude of being more than it could allow --- its throng of stems grown limp and brown with wilt --- she had been less downcast than confirmed in the appropriateness of her wilful frenzy. To these subordinate responses she had no active gain, except satisfaction, the implied approval; it was the answer she still sought --- with a clenched mind and forehead from hour to hour, concentrating to the ignorance of what waited or wailed around her --- that she knew she could maintain, keep by her.

Again she moved forward. "In the flesh!" She was wading through the swale of wetly withering herbage without a glance when the squeal of warped metal being bullied --- a guillotine rasp --- brought her up short. Cautiously she turned around the corner of the house. "Mahlon?" When the name came she realised it had just been born, but had a fitting ancestry and ring.

A van stood by her gate; a man in overalls had wrenched its rear door open and stood patiently, not waiting for her so much as living a long, unstrained moment.

"The tiles," he said pleasantly, with a soft, cultivated voice; "I would have dropped them off two days ago --- you weren't here when I first came by --- but I just couldn't manage to unload them on your flowerbeds, and of course daren't leave them in the road. Your yard was a mass of flowers! A pity they've gone already, so quickly... I've never had such a show of bloom from my own before, or seen it in another's ... especially in such a chilly spring... it takes a very special sort of something to get all that grandeur out of them, doesn't it?"

Intent on his face, whose serenity distracted her unfavourably, she scarcely noticed what he said, pouring out in her stare a concentrate to plumb to his bones, test what flesh his might be --- worked or potential? Yet to him her challenge was less a digital projection of the eyes than the flaunting of a pitted mask, shiny with indeterminable chiaroscuro. He went on easily.

"Notice how bland and shapeless seeds are? Peas in a pod, or pebbles. Never can tell how they'll come out; they promise you nothing; and once they're out there in the hands of the earth there're so many forces working against them and you... and then every flower once it grows is built on the same model, owns the identical skeleton, so to speak... so when you see them come up so various, so individual, you know there's something inside pushing, or outside pulling, that a human soul would recognise... something that makes whole gardens or orchards burst up and blush so, while the rest meet their quota with a proletarian indifference."

He got only a more powerfully querying stare, an abusively silent intake of his offerings, his light. A shy, friendly man, one of those perpetually in hope of shared interest or kin affection, he did not sigh or drop his constitutional smile, but turned towards the car with acceptance. "You'll be wanting me to stack up the tiles in the flower patches now --- or do you hope for --- ?"

"Ah --- yes, yes --- " she recovered, spoke brittlely, realised body business was called for after all. "Yes... they don't matter... went in no time... you'll be starting to work at once, I hope?"

"Tomorrow morning, if you like ... as it's so late," he answered, toting the tiles from the back of his van inside the gate and stacking them neatly on the rumpled soil of the flowerbeds; "lovely light to lie in, but treacherous for roofwork... tomorrow morning all right?"

She hesitated, appraising. The sunset had decayed into its seventh colour, velveted the wrack so that it took on a newly sepulchral beauty, but shadows were yawning on the roof. She was still not willing to dismiss the possibility that she might already be dealing with the working of her will. There was much about him she would not have wanted, but there was no doubting the pith of understanding and happiness. She could not give up searching him, optically, cat's-cradling the palps of her will --- could not keep her harsh blank stare off him as he worked.

"Perhaps --- perhaps it's the best ---"

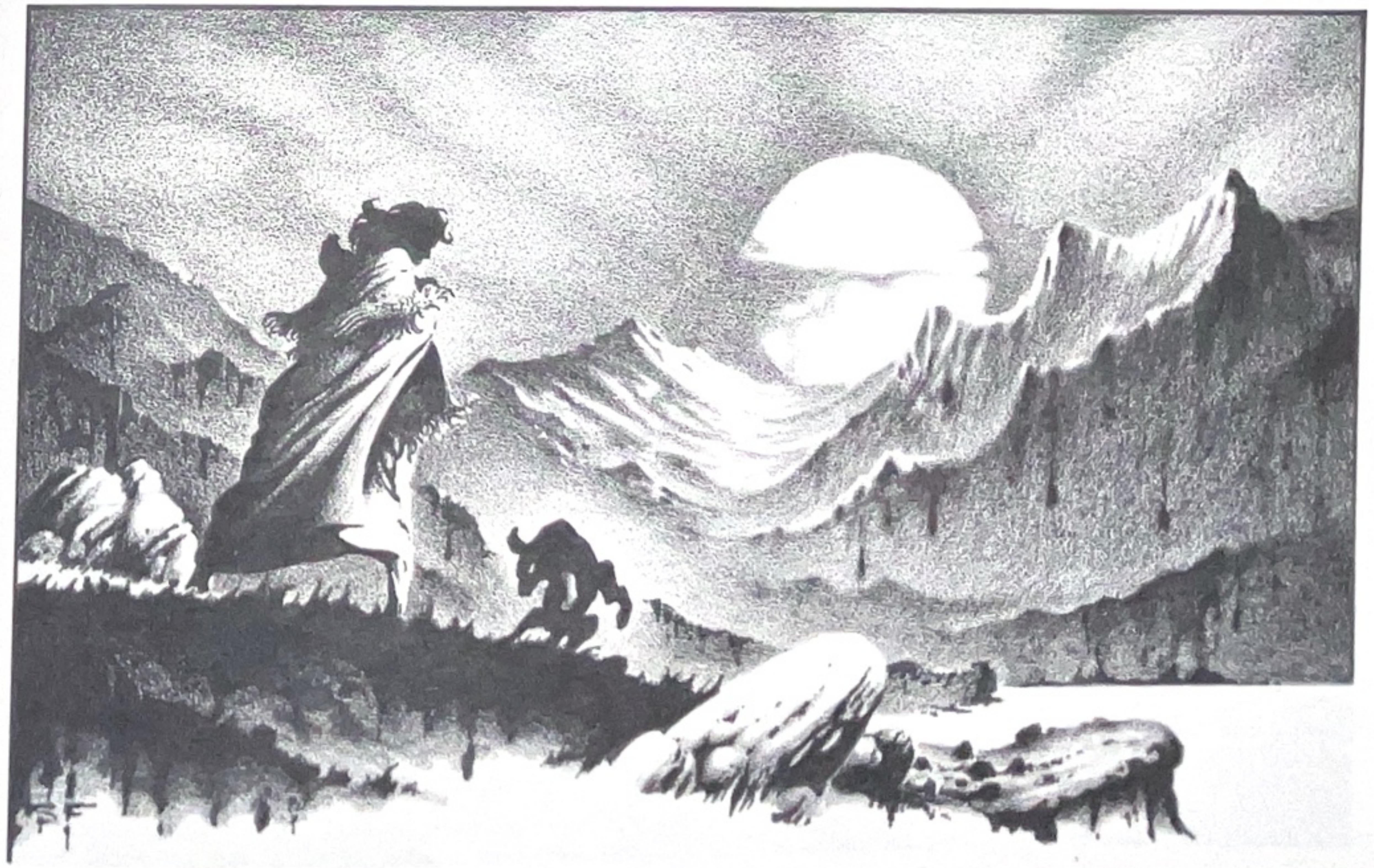
He paused to wipe his forehead, surveying the copper and magenta flush on cottage and headland. "The empire's new clothes... wonderful how much light can do with so little... quicker than a flower from dead earth yet more grand. I live near the coast, too, you know, in the pine grove... have a clear horizon for the stars to float from. Last evening of a sudden I noticed a little seedling was dancing with a flickering shadow in a marvellous dim light. No moon, and the stars of only usual strength... but Jupiter, the new star they want to call it, was just then rising, faint but still so powerful... could cast a small tree's shadow on its earth. The faint light of a body so remote could stage a ceremony on ours --- bell the shapes of trees as huge as night itself!"

Her start was unavoidably visible, yet she had delayed too long to change tactics, sure too much of what he said was only half hers. He had turned back again, no longer attuned for a response; she exerted herself with all the gravity of Jupiter or the newborn moon toward the warmth which rose in the urge of mountains, uncoiled in the brimming of the sea, to swing to herself the match, the pair. But her evocation to him had gone unanswered --- as had his to her; he had issued versicles of a rare sort, but the expected responses only groped blindly in her air.

He nodded finally, still pleasant, entered his van and drove away. In the sudden onset of darkness she felt the nearness of achievement, almost as if it were half done. The impact of her memorable visitor began to melt, to stain; she saw him now as counter to the will which might otherwise have been consummated with the last-light's halting aid; something precipitous, pregnant, which could have been rewound... And then she knew she still had the work to do, that her projection remained imperfect, fragmentary; worst of all, flawed by the gilt of the unexpected. The matrix now was there; the intensity of her power could be honed and focussed; she who could wake golcondas from cobblestones, an eden from dry clay, who had seen the summoned lightning thrust gone garoque through the half-heeded tenderness of dog's flesh --- she need not tolerate an incongruent persona. Turning her thoughts toward this visitor had lost her the harmonics of her own; there was no question but that she could work utterly alone, with elements entirely hers; could integrate as she would, in a compact so perfect that not a wisp of shadow would enter on it. When the moon came, black-caped but ocean-herding, she aligned with it, excluded everything not blent in her own ambit... and there was barely time for the beginnings of a scream, or the curious crackling noise which was thickly muffled.

He returned the next morning and, finding the house silent, hesitated to clamber immediately to the roof. Several hours of tolerant intimacy with the disgraced vegetation and the ashen light had passed before the alarm of the protracted silence signalled to him.

The body, grotesquely thickened, was doubled up on the mosaic of the parlour floor, fingers broad and crippled. The face was so atrociously contorted that he grew queasy with conviction of a horror exceeding death; but however brutalised, it remained essentially her own, bloated and grown as fierce and hating in the bone beneath as the spirit she had shown him the previous evening. Before going for help he felt along those spavined hands; the bones were everywhere doubled, mirrored, though the interlopers were much coarser; when the others came and felt in turn they found that a second, heavier skeleton had somehow taken its place within a network of alien veins, which had not been ready to receive it. The skull itself had telescoped, a larger one having formed like a crystal husk around the woman's own. The trim flesh had tried to accommodate it too; the stencilling of pain across the malformed face had overscored whatever other will or image might have been in residence before it came, and remained, determinedly final.



Ship of Ghouls

(Particulars of the Receipt of the Artful Museum of Dr. Frederik Ruysch, of Amsterdam, by His Imperial Majesty Pyotr I, Tsar of All the Russias, as entered at Sviatitel Peterburgi in May of the Year of Our Lord, 1718 (O.S.))

"We had better wait for His Excellency.... what in God's name is this rabble milling about for?"

"I called the draymen to transport the collection. The others are my personal overseers." Piqued at the implied slight, Nakazanin looked down from the pier at the crowd which mapped the secure zones of mud hillocks against the rotten-olive slime of the marshes. Still wrapped up against the morning chill, they rested undemonstrative under a leaden sky. But it was not of their clamour that Pochorony complained.

"Treasures so unique can hardly be entrusted to a gang of serfs."

"Which explains the particular choice of my overseers," Nakazanin answered, patting a yawn (the men's cloaks were too thick and closely gathered for their knouts to be visible). "Under threat of answering directly to His Excellency, they take personal responsibility for every item charged to them. Our---yours and mine, that is --- main concern is to certify the completeness of the shipment, drum, cask, and keg; theirs to forswear damage. Quite equitable. I even dismissed my secretary for the morning and intend to write the census with my own hand. The Dutch are supposed to be master coopers, so I trust damage will be inconsequential. Do you have the invoice?"

"I have it but I haven't opened it. Should I?"

Bleakly, Nakazanin stared at choppy waters fumbling with the indeterminate coast. A ship swung off the end of the pier, sails and flag down, featureless in the grey dawn; two sailors were visible at the rail, but the silent aspect was unmitigatedly lifeless. Through the quiet heavy air he believed he felt a new, disagreeable wind.

"Not yet," he answered abstractedly. "The message I got from the captain last night was --- evasive, peculiar. I want the General to handle everything."

"The Tsar himself may show up."

"Not likely at this hour..." Nakazanin had a heavy face, the unaccommodated weight of which sagged into doughy jowls. He rubbed his hands nervously over this double dewlap, scraping little rosettes of stubble deep in the pockmark craters. The air around them was rearranged, and he opened his mouth to sniff like a suspicious dog; over the sour marsh-miasm and the salt-embroidered savour of timbers and rope spread a new olfactory affront, in brusque successive fists. A swell of muttering charted its diffusion through the crowd, silence flagging its lee.

"Revolting. What was it?"

"Smelt like stale shchi."

It reached the road just as a carriage drew up, and greeted the short, stout, gaudily uniformed man who stepped down. Another, in sombre morning clothes, followed daintily and daubed his nostrils effusively with a quickly plucked handkerchief. They interrogated the air and each other, and stumped rapidly down the pier; the peasants' bows passed unnoticed

Nakazanin and Pochorony swept off their hats and bowed deeply in turn, the customary florid greetings rattling off in unison while General Sumashestviev batted his hands across his face as if discouraging flies.

"Yes, yes, morning, fine damned morning, damned stink if I ever snuffed one. Prince Pytkov, permit me to present two officials of our court. Prince; Nochozorny. Prince; Gapazanin. Now. Did either of you get some damned letter from this damned captain?"

They both bowed, and the General brushed away again. "Couldn't make a damned thing out of the one he sent me but it sounds like something is damned awry. Send out a boat and fetch the damned sail-swinger so we know what's what before we go any further. And tell these damned peasants not to fart another fart."

"I hope no wrong---" Pochorony's rhetorical anxieties were drowned in the general's summons, bellowed in a surprisingly crude dialect, to the ship for a skiff, interspersing reprimands to the peasants supposed culpable of the odour, his broad, flat, brilliantly beribboned back presented to the other three.

The man beside him, who had nodded only slightly to acknowledge the less titled, stood

quietly, narrow eyes and high cheeks accented by dark circles. As both men moved to second him he again interposed a melilot-perfumed handkerchief to his nostrils; Nakazanin nearly bowed again.

"With your permission, Your Highness," Pochorony started with hopefully oblique courtesy, "I understand that you advised the acquisition of Dr. Ruysch's museum---"

The Prince twiddled deprecating fingers in the air. "I only arranged the purchase, dear sir. His Majesty had examined Dr. Ruysch's work years ago, when he was in the Netherlands himself--- his anatomy studies at Leyden, you remember--- and the collection was much smaller then. I went only to appraise its current state and value."

"So there are a number of curiosities that His Majesty has not seen?"

"Some few, yes."

"Would you not favour us, Your Highness, with some idea of the Ruyschian skill? Despite the reports, none of us have been able to gain any real idea of the artistic effect of his conceits, as from one who has actually seen them."

"As you will, of course, soon have the opportunity to discover," the Prince started rather thinly, "its reputation does it justice--- though it exceeds the strictures of most civilised imaginations, I agree. To be surrounded by it---" as the General stalked up and down the pier another lathe of that purulent odour struck them, and the prince gasped --- "may I say, that it treats the eye much as this foetor does the nose. Anatomists may no longer be objects of horror; but on the predicate that their pursuits are kept private. It is true that in our age any curiosity commends attention, and that barbaric fascination with the morbid which convulses so much of Europe is not near extinction. Doubtless in another generation the likes of Dr. Ruysch's work will embellish all the capitals of Europe--- now that we can be counted among them" (a sly glance at the composed attendant faces) "as the doctor has attempted to raise the craft of the mortician to the artistic level of Michelagnolo-- or of Tiepolo, perhaps--- by injecting the precepts of aesthetics and moral philosophy into preparations and arrangements derived ultimately from the hands of the body-snatcher, the elements of the chopping-block. Profundity may be allowed, but the atmosphere is no more pleasant on that account; however deserved the admiration they receive, their stimulus to one's moral sensitivity is perhaps not what he intends.

"His chambers are only diffusely lighted, so that in the undemanding gloom--- and the instinctive hush--- you seem to be wandering not in a tomb, but in a broad world of death, less blanketed with air than with a deep breathable sea. Its inhabitants are frozen into a special and proprietory eternity; time has been squeezed utterly away. But they of course are not sculptures or marionettes, but very real bodies, not long before breathing fellows of our own. They remain upright in all the aspect of life, but employed in few occupations they likely whiled before the shadow of the scythe crossed over them. Some clasp to their shrunken eyes handkerchiefs which are composed of that membrane which aprons the interior of the belly, injected with colouring matter; every element, in fact, every structure used in the furnishing, the art, or the attire of his corpses is itself of corporeal origin. Surprising uses have been found even for the most recondite cadaverine components....

"For instance, I recall ---" he straightened his coat and mopped again with the fragrant handkerchief to ward off another wave front of the stench--- "all too well one particularly bizarre display. A pile of stones formed a cairn across which lay an articulated skeleton, performing madly upon a violin. The stones were the calculi of kidneys; the viol composed of preserved arteries, stiffened with intromitted gums of blue and scarlet--- such a trunk as is found over the heart or near the spine. From those rocks appeared to sprout sizable saplings --- in fact, hardened sprigs of ramifying vessels from the liver or the limbs. To its side, another small skeleton was jumping a skip-rope --- the bones a child's, and its 'rope' a child's intestine; another, nearby, closed its mangled hand around a dried mayfly.

"Intimations of mortality, of course. They sit naturally as in life, but their poses were of grief, lamentation, resignation... not since Pompeii or Sodom have the honest features of men carried their diurnal habits so far beyond the Styx..."

"And the ravages of decay?"

"Ah, that is the Dutchman's special secret. There is no appearance of dissolution; he bests it with repeated treatments of his special potions. His specimens in fact preserve the tone and brilliance of youth, whatever the length of their tenure with him. I was persuaded in a few cases that they might actually be living persons, postured to deceive; but a touch---"

"And is the doctor himself coming to reconstruct these same attitudes? Will he consider Peterburgi as fit a home for these--- these innovations--- as Amsterdam?"

"Apparently. He comes by another ship, however, and His Majesty's artist Konchin, who made drawings, will supervise the initial distribution--- identical to the last."

The General swung around to them. "Open your damned invoice, there, Nakazorny, and let's see how much of this damned stuff has to be carted off."

Pochorony whipped the packet from his waistcoat and slit it open. Pages fanned from his hand as he thumbed through it.

"The list suggests there are--- approximately--- thirteen hundred specimens."

The General's eyebrows shot up. "Thirteen hundred corpses?"

"Or parts thereof," Pytkov amended.

"So it says," Nakazanin parried.

"And how have they been packed?"

"In drums and barrels."

Sumashestviev looked back and forth, wide-eyed. "Not in coffins?"

"No, General. They are shipped in spirits, and spirits do not pack in coffins."

The boat arrived, finally, from the ship, carrying the boatswain but no captain. Sumashestviev's face grew dark and stuffed. Nakazanin noticed the same two sailors standing immobile at the ship's rail, as if no time had passed. When the boatswain presented the captain's compliments and requested the General and the Prince come aboard to confer they went out, Sumashestviev stumping loudly and the Prince with every moue and flutter of slight and disdain.

The two courtiers remained, visibly uncomfortable.

"Something is seriously amiss."

"Do you suppose, dear Nakazanin, that anything could be *right* with such a ghastly ship as this? What over hell possessed the Tsar to import such a gallery of monstrosities into Peterburgi? He'll afflict the city before it has begun. Ill fortune, for the sake of a covetousness after morbid novelty! The tenth commandment! St. Isak! It wouldn't hurt to keep just one--- "

"But the Prince said that in a few years---"

"I doubt it;" Pochorony found the General's fly-brushing very useful. "Dr. Ruysch is not likely to be any less secretive about his unique learning or his elixirs' formulae than are his fellow magicians, and he is now, I believe, eighty years old... so naturally...."

Their small talk was interrupted by the boat's return, and another suffusion of the noxious odour. An inert form on the boat's bottom was passed to hastily summoned hands above, and carted toward the carriage.

"What the devil happened?"

"His Highness fainted. And His Excellency requests that your lordships will both be pleased to come aboard." The sailor's calmness was glassy or waxen, imposed rather than inherent, a disturbing portent. After several well-timed hesitations, mutual glances, and false starts, the two courtiers dropped into the skiff. Another strange odour waited, but it was sweetish and alcoholic enough to be familiar, and therefore comforting.

But the oarsmen of the boat were empty-eyed and rowed rather at random. Neither of the two sailors at the ship's rail moved to assist them as they scrambled inexpertly up the Jacob's ladder, and those waiting were little less vacant than those left.

But as soon as they swung over the rail the horrible odour clutched them in full strength. It was the aromatic embodiment of lese-majeste; of the plethora of exotic scents now arriving regularly in Peterburgi for the Tsar's delectation this was the infiltrator, the *mattacchino*. Nakazanin's stomach undertook gentle pirouettes, and Pochorony's studied detachment was put on trial.

It permeated the craft from bow to stern. Guided to the captain's cabin they found it tamer only in a sealed staleness.

As they walked through the door the General's violently pounding voice broke off with a bark, and a resonant but cringing voice answered, "No one in the world fails to know what a drinking, dissolute bunch sailors---"

"And no one fails to know where a captain's authority lies!"

Entering, they were waved to chairs by a sweep of Sumashestviev's ribbon-weathering arm. The other man rose only halfway before sinking back, his face red and his wig askew. No formalities were observed; his uniform stood sole introduction as to Captain Razdagatsky.

"I hope Prince Pytkov---" Nakazanin broke into a brief silence; but the General snorted "Pantywaist!" and whirled to scowl through the only porthole. There was no need for formal courtesies; each was confronted with the unenviable fact that his own name was about to be connected with a matter of dismay to the Tsar, and thereby, very likely, to the eventual juxtaposition of his own entrails, which was sufficient to dispose each member of the cabin to several minutes' silent meditation.

Then the General whirled, storm-clouded and jovian, to supply the particular. "Damned sailors drank every drop of the damned brandy the damned stiffs were pickled in."

"And you think, General Sumashestviev, that I'd willingly risk my neck---"

"Risk your *neck!* You've risked everything between your crotch and your brainpan, and a damned bad risk it was. I hope you've got the damned wherewithal to make it good. You're answerable directly to the Tsar and unless I don't know His Majesty there'll be seven hells to pay and the account won't be due in liquor!"

It was convenient to have a scapegoat isolated, and the other two trained on him stares of severest disapprobation and self-dissociation. The General seemed already to have given a convincing intimation of the credits due for the circumstances soon to be presented to the court, and this last threat seemed the least disturbing to the rigid captain.

"The entire ship's cargo then is---?"

"The whole thing. The whole damned thing," Sumashestviev blared, with more smitings of the table.

"And the crew?"

"Drunk. Dead, bloody drunk. Drank every barrel of brandy on board between Amsterdam and Peterburgi and left the cargo to do the sailing, I suppose... By God, if men full of corpse-juice can sail right into Peterburgi harbour like Christians, what goblin crafts can't breach us? What if the next corpse-ship doesn't have a forecastle full of sleep-offs? Best call the metropolitan for an exorcism!"

"Before or after the burial rite?" Pochorony asked with poise.

"Burial rite!?" the captain stirred. "Surely we can throw this indistinguishable detritus overboard without any particular notice from the Church---"

"The Tsar's property?" Sumashestviev pounced thunderously. "Destroyed without his command? Better throw this pickled meat still pumping its lungs overboard, or jump yourself --- otherwise it'll be you and your sailors wiping your eyes with omentum hankies. Speaking of which..."

There was a long, suggestive pause, occupied by the Captain in drying his brow with obvious cotton. "'Course, you only have twenty and that makes twelve hundred and eighty to go, even allowing for the sharing out... so that's not much help, then. I'd have given every barrel of brandy in my cellar if it would! We've got a tale to tell and we want to tell it right, right? So everybody knows who's who and what's what. If the Tsar isn't going to be diverted by a damned crowd of trained corpses in didactic poses, I'm sure he'll be wanting another defile of corpses in their extemporaneous edification, monotonous though it be, by a Dutch canner's standards; so bring in the first of them while he can still wag his tongue faster than his bum and let's see what the damned drunks have to say about all this..."

The captain bellowed for an orderly and sent him to fetch Smerdyakov---"The ringleader or I'll be damned, the wildest of the rotten lot" --- and after a long delay there was a cautious tap at the door, another shout from the captain, a creaking opening, and the stumbling progress inside of a tilted hulk whose nubbled face rotated slowly from one to another of the murderous likenesses awaiting him. Each seemed to terrify him more--- if the gape of his mouth and the further recession of his dully-glimmering eyes was any index--- but when he arrived, finally, at that face wrinkled like an Englishman's bull-baiter, he clutched his chest and staggered back as if struck.

"God almighty! I knew it!" he gurgled. "Begging your pardon, sir, I thought it was all for the best--- no personal offence, mind you--- wouldn't have withered the nails on your little finger if I'd have knowed you'd object---"

"Through your gizzard with a pale of birch!" the General observed. "Knew what and what's for the best?"

"That face, sir! When you was looking up at me out of the casing when we started there--- first one we did, sir--- I told the boys--- damned if they'd drink fast enough!--- but I tried!--- I tried!"

"And you'll be tried harder, you damned slimy eel. But looking at you where? I haven't been east of Peterburgi for years, you damned toper ... Are you talking about some damned pickled Dutchman?"

"Dutchman, sir?" But he was clearly relieved to hear Russian from the General's mouth; he calmed enough to speak, despite gulping at every third word, and, by referring frequently to the wall, was almost able to stand upright in the close cabin. The only fearful glances he had left were expended at the glossy siding, where the dancing stove-fire was magnified to a demon mouth chattering.

"Your honour, here, sir--- the very first one --- I feared as it came to pass that I might--- but I meant nothing, you see, sir--- you'll allow the first one was just your spitting image, sir? The very first one?"

"Are you talking about the first corpse you drained dry and left to waddle into tallow, you damned useless chamberpot?"

"These tosspots have been seeing everything but the Tsar's palings in every shadow since they left---" Tazdagatsky began expansively, as if on the majority bench again, but a cocked eyebrow from the General stilled him instanter.

"Yes, sir..." The General wheeled full-face again and returned his attention to the sea beyond the porthole.

"See my face in a damned jellied Dutchman!"

"Yes, your honour... surely it's coincidence? ... like I tells the boys, sir, with all these dead people aboard who shouldn't be, sir, ought to be lying down and going back to dust like the priest says, ashes to ashes, you know, sirs... keeping their souls roped to them by these unnatural spirits, sirs, as what shouldn't never smell such... giving us these bad times and wasting good brandy on ways as how God never intended... and with shadows everywhere, and smiles in the waters at night when they'd ought to be dark, and funny winds and calms keeping us nowhere all the time--- and everybody knowing it ain't safe nor decent to haul no cadavers around on water, sir, like the prayer-book says, your honours and excellencies, sirs, you tosses them overboard and spits after them, you know--- my God!"

As his peroration had developed, his gyrations, too, had enlarged themselves, bringing his circling face nearer to Nakazanin and Pochorony, from whom he recoiled as well.

"Them too! Christ and St. Isak preserve me! Again! I should have known--- your pardons, sirs..."

His drift being now apparent the others requested no elucidation. It was being suggested that they had come to take charge of bodies already in possession of those features they had long considered uniquely their own, conjugated into the future imperfect tense; that it was the scent of their own mortality which now troubled their nostrils. Nakazanin wondered with some admiration why the General did not have this reeling drunkard impaled on the nearest boathook; but the granite wrinkles had found a new fascination in the waves outside.

"Ah, I knew it... I told the boys, I says, like that cursed ship--- and a Dutch ship it was then, too--- that never come to port, carried its dead crew working on the lines and sails till their fingers wore away and their bones after, I says--- I says, boys, we'll be becoming a Flying Russian for more days than God meant to give us, the Devil will say--- I even saw it one night, when we were becalmed off Helgyland, saw that ship that sails the night seas, the one made of dead men's nails, flickering like foxfire over every timber--- or nail--- of it, trailing hair longer nor seaweed through the water... and the dead men swarming out as they crossed our bow, hauling up those rotting lines of hair, their bones winking at me through the rents in their flesh ... I saw it, sirs! --- and I heard the bass-voice rumblings of the dead mates who worked her, with whips of snake's-spines... and I knew it, sirs, I told the boys, I said, we keeps like this and some night dead men are going to be pulling the hawsers from our hands, going to be hoisting sails whose canvas will split rotten at their touch, I says, and tars cold and bony as ice will steer us for ever off the land, I says... and it's high time, I says, that we gets rid of them corpses and liches and stiffs and such like and worse yet, all those spare pieces *because*, I says, who knows how long it'll be before the *owners* of them detachments comes heaving salty and barnacled and with bellies gaping like tunny-mouths right up out of the sea some night and comes nosing about the forecastle asking for their innards, I says... and who, I says, looking up from his binnace is a-going to have a ready answer for a waiting gasbag with the crabs still hanging from his sockets, as to where his heart is, now, sirs, I ask you? ... *I*'d be after it if they took away mine, now, wouldn't--- well, no, being gentlemen and all you'd send somebody, but it comes to the same thing... and there we were becalmed with the winds blowing us the wrong way, straight to the edge of the world like, right there at Helgyland in that black German Ocean that everyone knows is the world's worst sea, and everyone knows, sirs, every sailor, begging your honours' pardon, that there ain't no calms outside Helgyland except *dead* calms, you gets me, sirs?--- and I sees the breaths of them carcasses coming out of the taps and spigots and blowing their whistlings into the winds and the winds, sirs, like summoned spaniels, they turns right around and hustles us the wrong way, because what dead man, sirs, ever had pity for a quick one and, anyway, didn't they properly deserve their rest in that soggy Dutch soil they was born on with no wolves and such like running over them on cold nights like our cemeteries has, sirs--- and then when we were becalmed, you could see the big spirits in the mist dancing ring-a-rosy with their hands together keeping out the good winds, sirs, and I knew their spirits was a-coming out and holding us in, don't you know... and what their breaths and shadows could get out of, sirs, them carcasses themselves could break loose from whenever they took it to their heads, sirs, and I knew they was going to raise up out of the splintered kindling, sirs, and take over the whole boat the same way, sirs, yank the ropes from us and scuttle the ship and float so bloated back to Amsterdam if nothing else would do, and leave us paddling around the sharks and sea monsters... if they didn't even send an embassy down to their kith on the black floor where the horrors roll, and lure them up to us, don't you see, sirs?--- and, sirs, you knows what to say about stiffs what don't rot, sirs, for bodies to look so lively when death sat on them a year or more ago, sirs... why, even you great gentlemen, your worships, begging your pardons, sirs, even you know what death and a few days' stretch does to a body... why, you can't look at them bodies like they was only did in yesterday and seeing them bright and fresh as if we just put the hanky on their jaws this morning, and after a week's calm and batterings about in the sea look so peaceful and contented and without a care in the hereafter, sirs, them as was meant half for hell as much for heaven, sirs, and not know it, sirs, them bodies, sirs, they was blood-suckers--- bone-chewers---breath-drinkers, sirs, you knows it as well as we all ... and I says, boys, I says, if we leaves these things be, boys, if we don't send these here proper root-pushers to the dissolution they requires, sirs, why, we are going to be slung around the world under the whips that mad Dutchman made out of blood veins, sirs, and be captained by a skeleton with one of them capes he pulled out of honest men's bellies, sirs, and wear a fancy hat what ought to be a liver, sirs,

and serving up tears for water and dust for meat, with stiffs for drinking-partners and jokes as what it would pain our bellies, sirs, to laugh at... and none of us, I says, sirs, will ever live to see our homes and wenches again, sirs, and here we are daring monsters right up out of their slimy beds, sirs, such kin and wenches as how *these* stiffs would take delight too, having no fears, you know, sirs, knowing all the things we never know, isn't that true, sirs?

"And I mean, if you knows sailors, sirs, them thoughts just about done them boys in... I mean, we runs all kinds of risks, sirs, we slither right through a double row of krakens and never thinks it twice, sirs, and we tosses who dies right into the water, spitting of course, and never gives a thought to their trailing us even if we leaves out the lead, sirs... nor who we bury when we land... but when it comes to that big smelly Sargasso sea of death we doesn't never breach but once--- I mean anyone who's ever sat a night watch, sirs, to two bells --- you know, begging your pardon, sirs, you don't never want to sit one of them with ice and phlegm in your veins instead of rum and blood, with only a shroud to keep the blast off your skin, now, does you, sirs? You gets me?"

"We will, we will," the General observed.

"And so as I says, sirs, I tells Gdeneashvili, he what's so wise in his fool southern way and fought with witches down in the mountains when he was young and even found Baba Yaga's cottage once, so he tells me, sirs, bein' a fool as he is and all, and clipped the toenails off one foot before it turned around and even followed it when it started to walk away and got a terrific kick what he says is the scar he wears across his belly now, and as I've heard him tell many times, sirs, how he knew how to fight ghosts and devils, I asked him what to do, knowing as we didn't dare throw them carcasses overboard with the captain here watching nor even spit after them, sirs, God help us all... and he tells me, sirs, about this time when he was a young fellow, sirs, back down in them hopeless little villages along the Volgy, sirs, when they was troubled by spirits of a like nature, sirs, coming to pester them, and peering through their windows and their doors, and pinching their necks and behinds whenever they took to the well or the outhouse, sirs, and riding their horses ragged and such like, and they wouldn't lie, and there was this old priest--- not your young kind with all that fancy useless book-learned foolishness--- but one of them old ones what knows what's what and who walks and who should lie down at the nighttime, sirs, and this old excellency, sirs, he says, 'Ashes to ashes, and dust to dust,' he says, and 'spirits to spirits,' he says, and throws a tot of vodka across every threshold where the ghosts was standing and then and there they blew off like a last flame and didn't come back no more, sirs, and that was the end of it; and I says, well, I says, if it's that simple, boys, I guess we don't need no priest, since, I says, he didn't say no blessing nor nothing, and of course they said, no, Luka Afanasiyich, so I says, well, boys, better we toss the spirits here and now, and them corpses is bound to follow like the weight around a man's neck, right?

"But they says, but, Luka Afanasiyich, they says, them corpses is going to sit and listen to us and watch us while we does the tossing; and if they don't blow away like ghosts... if we don't see the shadows going... maybe they won't, you know, really --- and sit there smirking at us and thumbing their noses as fast as they drop off, and such like--- once we've tossed all the spirits and if they're still laughing at us there, what do we do then?"

"So I thinks a bit, and I says, well, boys, actually, you know, they've got to watch us so they know what we're up to and what comes next if that don't move them, and that ought to teach them something; so, then, sirs, me, a simple man who can't even read nor understand scripture, I has a brilliant idea... I says, what it means is, of course, we've got to *toss* the spirits, but we've got to *keep* the spirits for more tossing, so they know we ain't licked, exhausted, I says. That means, we toss the spirits right over their heads, only when it's tossed, somebody's mouth on the other side has got to catch it, right?--- and then we've got it, sirs, you know, if it should happen, sirs, that we needed it again, why then we can just run it back over, and, God help us sirs, if we hadn't pissed it all away in the next wind, by God, I wouldn't be confronted with these faces I'm seeing and hearing, begging your excellencies' pardon---" and heedless of the clench of fists and jaws around the room went on steadily, "and that was what we did, sirs... it was just to protect ourselves --- and we got back to Peterburgi, didn't we, sirs? --- after all them calms and all them spook ships and the like what hit us before we done the tossing?-- and if we hadn't, sirs, who would ever have known what had happened to us --- *or* the Tsar's goodies, here, sirs?

"And were they ever mad, sirs!--- begging your pardons, of course, you knows it all well, I can see, and like I'm sorry, but how was I to know?" The appeal cast at each of them was stiffly rebounded. "With their faces all squidgied up down there under the spirit; as soon as we took a candle to them they squirted out their shadows like an octopus his ink---

grown up bigger than a man, dancing over the walls with hair-pulling rage! Yes, sirs, them was tense moments at first when we thought we'd have to fight the shadows... so we had to get started right at once with the spirit-tossing, sirs, saying 'Spirits to spirits' and 'Cheers!' and such like--- yes! you should have seen them! the lower the spirit went in their tubs, the angrier the shadows danced, sirs!--- and the expressions that flickered over those dead faces as they came up to air, sirs--- madder than a fish hauled from thirty fathoms--- clutching toward us with claws, but they were just hollow darkness--- and clutched less and less as the spirit sank... I'd toss a cupful across *his* face to Semyon Venyaminich, sirs, which he'd catch artfully as a juggler with his mouth, sirs, and Dyonyseii Krisostomovich would toss one back which I'd catch best I could... you should have seen how the shadows shook and raged, sirs!--- knew we had them by the---ah--- noses, sirs--- and the storms fell, and the shadows faded as we went on, sirs, cast the spirits, sirs, the winds died, and the sails filled for the right direction...

"The more we spirited, the faster we sailed, sirs, until we were going up the Skagerrak and homeward bound in record time, sirs... we knew them stiffs was beaten and we had none but our own fellow blood-kind to worry about... never fear taking a hawser from dripping green fingers, unrolling a sail and finding wights smiling wider with their ribs than with their teeth jumping up to greet us--- yes, we knew we had them! So we kept on tossing, sirs, day and night, till all was done, keeping them watches religious-like as our own, sirs, and watching them liches shrivel and peel and wrinkle and chilblain every day, sirs--- knowing they had to rot now like Christian gentlemen--- and then we knew we'd make it home, sirs, and what a relief it was to all of us!

"And if I'd known--- if I'd known I'd come home to find these same faces waiting--- that one there---" Sumashestviev would have been the recipient of any bisector constructed through the arc established by Smerdyakov's outstretched finger--- his scowl so foreshortened his face that it did seem to be viewed through an aqueous medium, and the reek of brandy enveloping him no longer seemed insignificant --- "and that there, and him---" indicating an increasingly discomfited Nakazanin and Pochorony, who affirmed their vitality with wrist and neck---"and him---" even the captain was included in this rectidigital accusation, "him who they labelled the 'Spirit of Gluttony,' who we found doubled up in his cask satisfied-looking and drunker than six skunks and a priest on Monday night---"

"And the Spirit of Mutiny," the captain roared back, "will rise higher than a kite and it won't be on liquor!"

"This is what comes of your damned sailors listening to those damned Calvinists preaching in Amsterdam!" Sumashestviev snorted. "Give 'em an hour or two with a damned catechism before we spit 'em. Rotting 'em for their damned spirits, indeed! Vampires in brandy, at sea! A little home soil, maybe, but brandy---!"

"Well, gentlemen, to business; none of us being much worse for our damned troubles after getting marmaladed in Amsterdam, I daresay--- hmmf. Yes, captain, I know--- I'm no throne-room general, you know--- I know how usual it is to have to sail the worst damned strait or tempest in the world with a damned crew of roaring drunks, and I'll grant you a damned impress of corpses would have done a damned sight better job, but tell me, my good sir---" he leaned persuasively close to the captain's unwillingly lifted face, "did it never occur to you that this damned endless orgy presupposed some damned infinite supply of intoxicant aboard--- and that the single conceivable supply, granting you keep the damned tars temperate, as any captain is bound to do if he knows his proof--- er, stuff --- and that, in the interests of a calm voyage, a smooth sail, the Tsar's pleasure, and the *welfare of your own guts*--- might best have been checked with some regularity?"

Nakazanin and Pochorony thought of the shaken voyage with a hold load of corpses, afflati of must and woodrot, fumes from boxes and bales, stirrings in kegs and drums... if brandy needed only a hot calm to blow its lids, what impulses might so much unhappy additive not wake--- so many squatting, twisted, dismantled, smiling, frowning, pristine as death's-kiss, immodest of their brains and colons, disdainful of the common anneal... it was little remarkable that the captain had found himself more pressed with other concerns.

"But," Nakazanin murmured, less accusing than than reflective, "surely a drunkenness sprung of such *liqueur de la mort*--- of *cocktaux de pourriture*--- brandy and corpse-juice with a twist of soggy skin tossed from mouth to mouth --- and intoxication distilled from fleshly immortality--- must have been sufficiently grotesque to give glimmers of its outre source? Could an excess of carcass-keeper produce no worse consequence than the hangover of the intemperate?"

"Indeed!" the captain rose, fluorescing October colours, "there was in their breath the chill of foreboding! But a ship is not, gentlemen, an orangerie; an undesirable odour of whatever sinew is scarcely marked during a voyage well-furnished with others. It is true that there was much talk at the outset of the element of bad luck attending such a cargo; except to threaten death to those who yammered, I made no effort to countermand it, as is my way, since such superstitions are commonplace, and, in the long run, who can really say? The intensest of convictions themselves breed response. The men kept leaping back from shadows and candles, cursing the winds and poxing the calms. One night several men jumped up during mess complaining that an interloper was dining among them, and wouldn't be quieted until they had counted noses! I was rather pleased than otherwise when all this began to quiet as we came down the Kattegat. I thought reason had come into them; knew brandy had, too, little witting its source, these men always being so ingenious at smuggling aboard their own supply--- well known, little admitted--- blissfully unaware that all the whiles those treasured cadavers beneath our feet sank desiccate and wormy as ship's biscuit and salt pork, and that it was the sight of the former and not an extra toss of the latter which quieted those incorrigibles, ended their protests against night watches, calm seas, and twisting shadows... so the means by which they maintained themselves even more incompetent than usual was thus of little gravity until I discovered among us a wicked madness... and once I descried it fully gowned, may I not appeal to the reason of such gentlemanly courtiers in suggesting that I then felt justified in sharing the general unease? Indeed, there were times...

"But this rogue, here, for instance, telling me in a passion (and usually not an ounce of energy in him, either) that he never meant it, that I needn't trouble him beyond the grave--- that I should let the captain---meaning me, myself, sirs--- back into this body and take no vengeance on him, that he'd repent and burn candles and so on--- even trying to tell me I was swearing at him in Dutch---"

"*Dodaarse* he called me, sirs, Dutch true enough---" a whimper from the corner.

"--- that I realised he had gone raving mad. But he was soon much companied! It was no longer a few inebriates, but a dozen lunatics a day, I had to chart my course among! Foma Prokofievich demanding to know who had changed his shape, or tried and, having failed, had hidden his face behind a silk mask that showed no feature; Vissarion Pavelovich laughing at the image of death as a gaunt saint with a scythe when in fact it crawled many-armed and sharp-pincered over the sea-floor's icy mud; Nikon Arkadiyich complaining that histories unbearable to hear and older than the tongue kept sloughing up at him from the dust, rising in elegance and subsiding in dullness... but the worst of all was Spiridon Matislavich, that primitive, with such talk of stars inside skulls, and the worst of the Baltic winds tickling skin it shouldn't reach, and raging when a anyone snuffed a candle because a line between a star and a soul was cut... talk of struggling against shapeless monsters! Yet the worst was that they seemed to forget who they were; one man would take himself for another. And it peaked finally when this same idiot, Luka Afanasiyich himself, went stomping around giving the orders in my own voice, and setting a course I had charted with my own hands that morning but not yet given out, and complaining in the midst of it of a belly-pain I had sharp enough but hadn't whispered of to a soul...

"It was a rough trip back to Peterburgi, for what God wills me, and only at the end that I found out we had given up that precious cargo to the malfeasances of time... that flesh sloughed to indeterminacy, sirs, and the souls above seemed to flow and join together as the meat of those they cheated---" and he shuddered visibly, clearly heartfelt.

Each auditor being lost in question of the trough down which his own grue might soon be sliding, and rather less interested in the possible receptacles of their souls, the General's return to command, delivered with heightened brow and wattles, and a hand throned firmly on his paunch, came with stunning abruptness:

"So the crew expects to have the souls of those deprived as much of bodies as of rest to wreak vengeance and indignities upon them, eh? recognising the same antipathies and promise in our reception committee, eh? Well, there's truth to one so there may be truth to the other. So you, you damned scoundrel---" appropriating Smerdyakov's collar with one granitic fist--- "will trot downstairs and show me this carcass --- or whatever's left of it--- you claim was my unspitting image. We'll see how much vengeance sailed across from tulip-land, and how much reared up at home shore to greet you. March, damn you!"

While neither Pochorony nor Nakazanin had any desire to view himself in his ultimate resolution, no such revulsion attached to any glimpse of the breath-derelict General; they rose and followed dutifully as the sailor was hustled from the room, as, still hoping for some reprieve from an unindicted source, did the captain.

"Delusions brewed as bodies festered, eh? Morale soared as flesh shrivelled? Dreams dribbled as booze flooded..." The General pushed the ribbering sailor remorselessly into the shadow-hutch of the hold; the others gasped, to a man, at the thought of finding themselves coopered here among other unsuccessful competitors for warmth. But when the eely guide's yawing finger finally settled more or less steadily on a single barrel, whose top timbers had been carelessly replaced, and the General dislodged them with a sharp kick, they crowded forward heedless that the barrel, no more expansive than most of its kind, kept its coy compass to a single viewer at once.

"Hm. Hmmm. Looks like tub scrapings and

quite a bit of damned goose grease... what!" The waggling Smerdyakov, already subsiding into glassy torpor, was released to slither to the floor as the ejaculation burst from his judgmatic rumble like a smother of bedbugs from clean sheets. The shock it betrayed belied his overbearing dismissal on rearing up: "Poppycock! Not a jowl nor a whisker left on the bugger--- it's a clean skull and no mistake!"

Inertia--- he was already half-bent forward--- carried Nakazanin's face to the peerport once the General had backed off, but he surveyed the pestilential well for only a few moments before reeling away, clutching his chest.

With the General fascinated by the porthole again and Nakazanin near collapse, Pochorony steeled himself for an introduction to the terminal effluvium of his kind. The single port was now mostly obscured, and only one candle overhead lit the mildewed hold; he was at first uncertain how to read the bottled chiaroscuro. Certainly there was an untampered skull--- the one constant, the one affirmation of the ultimate irrelevance of whatever else flesh good or gone might have challenged him with--- but associated beneath it was a nondescript substance which seemed to shift, to realign itself, before his eyes, however he tried to convince himself that only a play was cast in his perception. On this grisly mirror, stretching down from the chin in a diminishing curve, small alterations in the swell and dip of corpse-fat slowly stippled a very creditable reflection of his own face, squinted in malevolence.

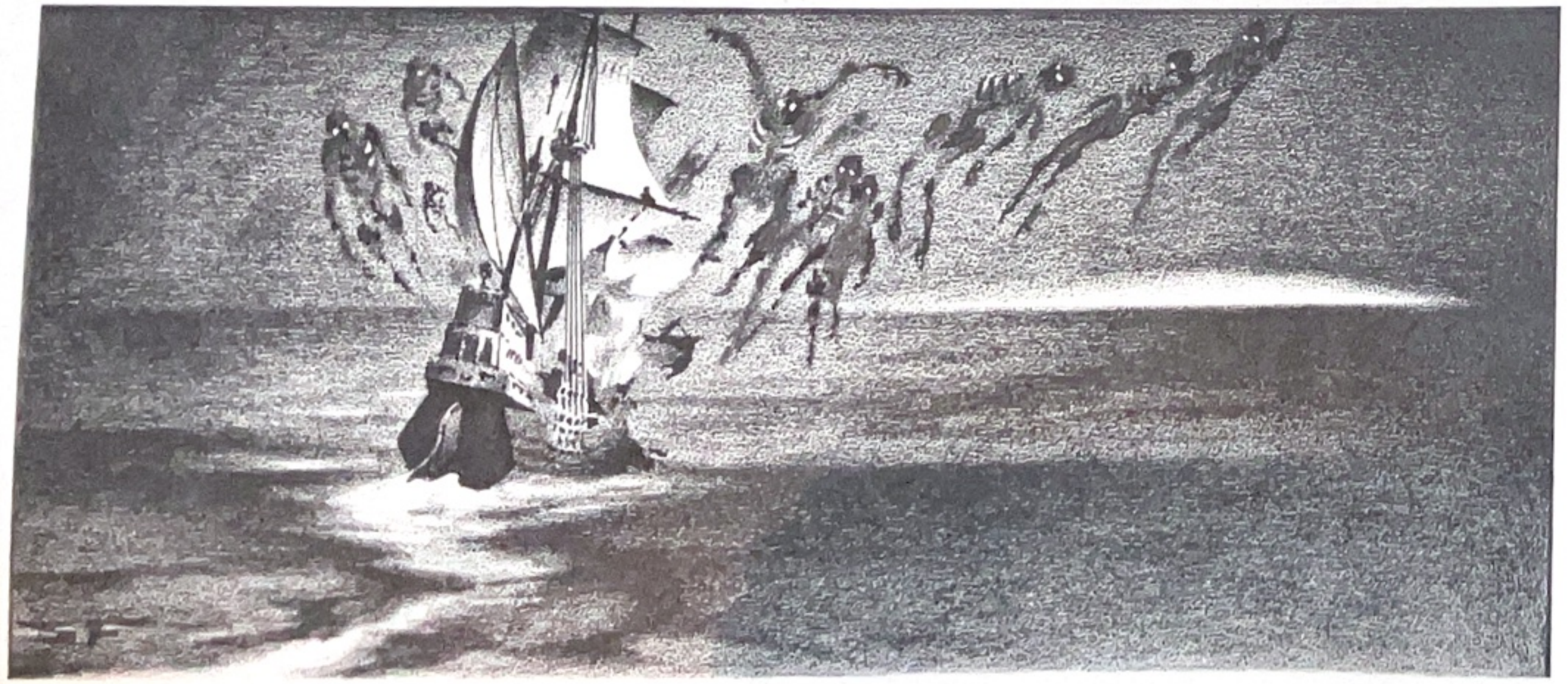
He made quite sure: it had not been there when he first looked, and he knew that his own features so presented would have discomfited neither the General nor his partner.

Smerdyakov had seen his coming judgment in it; his judges arrived to find themselves already present there--- judged?--- in all the familiar plumage of their faults. In anonymity is infinite potential, and the flesh is made indifferently a vehicle for threat, lust, or the malice which has so disquieting a tendency to survive it. In an imperial way this same matrix had threatened the sailors with a living damnation they had not failed to read; the tortures promised by their own, still inhabited, were only less prolonged in time. Philosophers saw through flesh to bone; the simple read through features to the future... this sediment might even have been the meter of an executioner in that differently sibillated court. Ruysch snatched secrets from the mouth of the worm; whispering to himself among his shadowy assemblage, what ears might not have been open? What shadows drunk and spewed again? There seemed to be a resident intention unique and diagnostic to the flesh, to chastise its kind.

The features he had first seen beneath him faded quite clearly as he pondered, and the worm's-meat resumed its canonical nap.

Pochorony turned to the General, who had whipped out and was uncorking his belt-flask. "As sophists would say," Pochorony delivered, "merely a reminder of the common ground of our mutual clay."

Cocking an indignant eyebrow at his brothered blood, the General muttered, "A sobering thought," and drained his flask with a gulp.



Chameleon That Blinks Barbed Stars

I

"That hell-pantheon that glitters in the skies draws not the worship of primitives --- simple, sun-dazed men, Dr. Vulliamy --- but that only of those whose knowledge and comprehension transcend what is popularly supposed to be barbarian --- who appreciate that every star is a sun, has its plane of command on every world --- without regard to brute size. That, interlocked by their infinite searing bristles, all the lesser substance of the universe is fenced within a conflagration of lives and thoughts, dominions and principalities, of arcane influences wielded through other brands of light --- and darkness.

"There is a rare sort of intuition here, doctor. Slowly, with our latter-day metal excrescences, we learn that phlegethontes of incandescent plasma rage over the skins of suns in cerebral swirls --- that hurricanes of bolides ooze outward like ambitions --- that voices murmur from *nuées ardentes* --- all at a speed and power, whatever their stygian size, surpassing any subplanetary brain --- yet in a complexity and systematics of generation, in rebound from the cosmos' provocations, which compels us to recognise the rhythms and impulses, the multiplying volitions, of our own vehicles of mind! Yet in one moment their abacus of lightnings genders more dreams and schemes than a worldful of grated nerves.

"And these men --- these men in old Tibet --- and every other country had, without resort to such massive engineering, the alkahest in their touch, the almuchese in their eyes; they could read the fiery writing, hear the storming whispers --- answer with a glow when asked. They decoyed whole armies of confident men into quick annihilation, translating the stars' will to human terms. Can any astronomer fiddling with his equations today, satisfied with the court-plastered, expressionless slate his lens gives him, claim so intimate a knowledge of the beings he acknowledges his life to hang from? Yet out of centuries and empires of night-rites such awarenesses have grown. The sun-worshippers pinched themselves into too narrow a vise."

"And you find all these suppositions --- such advanced wisdom, such competent cosmology --- quite compatible with the persistence of blood sacrifice and cannibalism?"

"Need they not be?" The German lifted his teacup calmly to his lips. "Is it inconsistent with the behaviour of our suns? Are you so certain that your ethics are compatible with the abrasions of the incendiary cosmos? I may not share your assurance of their survival value."

"It depends entirely upon the sort of survival you prefer."

"The universe's mutable fires seem likely to outlast our hopes, doctor. Stars are entities giving off titan quantities of energy; living organisms are entities absorbing it. Death reverses the process. Those that stitch with their million needles a warp of monstrous marriages through the worlds; breed with their funerals epidemics of misbegettings --- they forge a bond and covenant; an input at birth --- read or coded --- which only death can make accessible. Yet their energy must be turned to the execution of death; the act itself is almost an implosive absorption. Enough so, perhaps, to boil over the now stultified body and hiss into the ambit of the living.

"Some Bonpo priests believe they can assume all the energies of a sacrificed victim, can double or multiply their power if they acquire as well integers of the learning, aura, or strength of their victims. You know of their claims to be able to reanimate a corpse briefly for various purposes. It of course requires more than ordinary brain-energy, a nucleus of force sufficient to operate a second body; but you hear no claims of potions or hypnosis working as, for instance, among your black wizards of Haiti. Where there is a transference of so much power --- do not interrupt, Dr. Vulliamy, I assure you I am not altogether speculating --- it seems probable that in the terms we speak of, there are very positive changes to be effected by undertaking, under appropriate circumstances, a human death. There is food for thought there."

"Not for me." Vulliamy was furious with

himself for sitting in impeccable hospitality to a guest his sixty years' hard-bought commitment to nonviolence required him to welcome had he arrived with a child's freshly drawn viscera looped over one arm --- even for permitting him and the screaming putrescent doppleganger of all he stood for to cross his threshold; and all the more so to have to admit that he was actually grateful that this same hypocritical convention enabled him to contact a harbinger of that treeless cynosure of his thoughts, brought into his parlour in urban Zizhong the braying of thighbones and bass-chorded chantings, glacial winds, the reek of butter lamps, the shadows of striped walls.

And this man, sitting before him with hands abundantly smeared with the dye his uniform promised continents, had just claimed that, during his year's sojourn in Tibet --- at least in the peripheral province of Amdo, where the black-hatted Bonpos outnumbered the Buddhists --- he had been instructed in the inner secrets of a faith which, Vulliamy well knew, involved human sacrifice no less frequently than one every three years --- and, he believed, more often in practice.

However blond, Fleischhacker was not a successful stereotype. His face was narrow and high-cheeked, but too sharp-nosed to mongolate; yet he could assume at will a mask which left the character behind it innominate. A chameleon whose colours of emotion and personality obscured what lay or lacked within, he had entered Amdo as a German and attempted (having an excellent command of Tibetan) to cross the frontier into Inner Tibet, being turned back, as almost everyone is, many miles from Lhasa. (Had he reached within a hundred miles of the Forbidden City, which he did not say, he would, in fact, have achieved a very different sort of goal, which Vulliamy rather suspected was his aim.) Perhaps the blood-sprinkled shamans in Amdo had recognised a kindred element in him which overrode their normal distrust of foreigners. Yet he had returned to Szechwan in the guise of a Russian --- a specific Russian --- unheralded even by the whispered pulse of bush telegram.

Seeking out Vulliamy, he had brought a sacred mask as a gift ("It is almost a relique I bring you --- a True Face"): fretwork and flambeaux of yellow silk revelled like salamanders into a sunshaped mandala, impotent of eye and mouth, but latent with animal heat. It was tinted not the saffron of peace, but the outspoken gold of lust, and there were signs of wear on the black straps which fastened it to the head. Vulliamy wished that a speaking tongue, stored with the mysteries of the star-rites, had inhabited that mouldy mouth.

The German's grandiose claims to have penetrated the heart of a faith never before breached by foreigners he had of course subjected to immediate tests, but the man had passed with contemptuous confidence. Vulliamy himself owned more knowledge about the black faith than any known outsider and on all those points he checked --- many more than he had ever published --- he had grudgingly to grant the German every point. Where he evaded direct answers he still intimated superior learning with unquestionable details.

"I can be as certain of the information I was given there," he had answered to Vulliamy's most caustic question, "as Mme. David Neel that she was truly instructed in occult Buddhist; but a good deal of the proof, as you want it, may have to wait some years on independent correlation. As I say, I became an initiate, then a priest --- taking part in the ceremonies, living in one of the great monasteries of Amdo. I carry in the inviolable store of my memory --- as is appropriate to its preliterate character --- the verses of at least the first two-thirds of the *Kyeddzog*, and there is not yet, of course, in Western possession, a text to check me by." Vulliamy, with more private information than the other suspected, wondered why a self-proclaimed practitioner of the Bonpo magic would learn only those sections of his secret book dealing with the incantation and wielding of demons, and omit the latter --- to Tibetans more important --- section specifying how to exorcise them. This darker-than-Yezidi primer to intimacies with the wavering shadows of lunar craters, flurries of form in the hot currents of asphalt oceans, the stinging fibres of arachnid trenches, had never passed through the eye of any Westerner; even the knowledge of its existence was an index of his depth of penetration into their lore. He knew, too, of that smoky citadel of star-gods and moon-makers, Shang Shung, a hundred miles or so north of Lhasa --- an indication the German had raised without name --- and though Vulliamy knew it only as a sort of historic centre for the Bonpos, he was less doubtful that it might be a kind of underworld Vatican or Mecca as the German hinted.

"Still it is curious," he persisted, "that they should choose this time and place and your person to void their millennial tabu ---"

"But of course I had an entrée," the German answered narrow-eyed, "which none before me had brought."

"An entrée?" The doctor had not been thinking, and the German's smile was pedantic.

"Curiosity about its history, Dr. Vulliamy, was the thing which first turned my thoughts toward Asia. My expedition was funded by a party grant influenced solely by the interest it aroused. When I showed them, the Bonpos, and finally persuaded them, that our own people have discovered and resurrected the symbol from which even the name and significance of their faith is taken, they were agreeable to initiating me --- assumed, even, that they could tell me little new, but merely refresh my memory --- and apprised of the existence of a whole people who share their honour and employ of this symbol --- "

"Honour and employ? The damned thing is just the flyfoot sun-cross turned backwards. Switched because the first Buddhists used the normal version --- a sign of contempt, as is the fact that they chant the Lotus Mantra backwards. Stupidity and incoherence given the freight of hatred and desecration, meaningless as a goat's blatt and not half so old."

The German sat staidly through this outburst as if he had expected it, and Vulliamy gripped himself again. "... If I allow, doctor, that the famous flyfoot cross came into Tibet, in Buddhist baggage, from old India and in turn from Iran and, in turn, from the sunny valleys of the Volga and Oder --- will you then permit the possibility that this same pregnant symbol might have undergone a conversion, in prehistoric antiquity, from exactly the same sinistrorse figure that we speak of, to a right-hand form --- and for the same reasons? That the cross of the aboriginal Tibetans, left now to the Bonpos, is ancient, a survivor of that fundamental religion --- the power-religion, blood-religion, life-religion --- of the earliest conscious, sentient men --- inverted in fear, or in contempt, by apostates to the epicene philosophies of malnourished Persians, epileptic Egyptians, poisoned Greeks, and crucified Jews? Your eminent countrywoman Dr. Murray allows that a religion similar in all its features to the ancient under-faith of Tibet, China, and Turkestan competed with those other faiths in Europe well into our own era."

"Using a swastika?"

"Who can say? The apostles of love destroyed almost everything that was their opponents'. They matched virulence with virulence in those days! They had been shaped in their response by the gods they abandoned --- throwing them contempt for strength. Man's moral fibre and concepts have been so reduced, so riddled by some worm-like intervention --- virtually to a homeopathic tincture here, overriding those vigorous Tibetan originals by the pallid Buddhists, Kalmucks, Dzungarians, and Chinese --- who left ruins and smoke and the ghosts of flitting philosophies to replace them.

"No, the whole means and avenue to power has had to be reconstructed knot by knot. The symbolic ursprache of the ancient world persists surprisingly strongly, and a Rosetta stone may be at hand --- only by virtue of the Bonpos' opening up at last to hints which have survived elsewhere, and become obscured in their own homes."

Vulliamy lifted the mask he would not let out of his jealous hands. "And you believe these enigmatic masks will stand recognisable before your kinsmen in Germany? What you have been telling me hardly allows for the paramount importance of these masks in the accounts I have been given."

"Not at all, dear doctor. The various gods and demons are identified with the stars, and the priest who takes on the role of the god is recognised as such by the mask he wears, and treated accordingly. With good reason. In your studies you have speculated as to whether the supposed supreme deity (and your deductions here are very cogent, sir), gShenrabs Mibosh, may not be a deified priest. Indeed he was: how deified you would be surprised to know: but he was the *last* --- not the first --- of a long line of men to achieve a state of being difficult to define, and unknown since his day. The story is that once they have achieved total apotheosis they are not seen without masks, but of course you know how to interpret that. A human face, at all events, will not be seen on such a head. But there were in the ancient days --- what mimics your Buddhists prove to be! --- a long and powerful line of men invested with power from the star-gods."

"Men rarely profit from godhood, their own or someone else's."

"Yet most Tibetans believe that gods reside in their land today; is it surprising that they took so readily to such a belief if in fact they have memories of gods occupying men's bodies --- with demonstrably superhuman powers --- having trod their stony roads centuries before? Those men could not be replaced by children coddled to pick a ragged hat or broken bowl! Originally --- "

"Your 'originally' can only be supposition, nothing having been written down."

"To satisfy you as a scholar, I should have to agree, doctor, and say no, I have no proofs. But there are diverse kinds of evidence. You have made use of inferential data yourself. There is the evidence of the senses, and in the chain of causality which trails its links in the fresh clay of human records. Perhaps I can enlighten you just a little further, but I could not do it by appeals to your erudition. The aspect of my search in which the party and government were most interested has been quite successful, and I expect them to be pleased and willing to return me to the field as soon as possible --- in order to finish the practical aspects of my work. And, of course, if you are still here in Szechwan when I return, I can unfold a good deal more --- "

"That I am afraid is altogether improbable. I am leaving in two days for the coast; certainly it is safe to say that if I should in fact survive the trip downriver, under Japanese fire, and along the coast, over Japanese torpedoes, and somehow manage to reach England again --- no matter of course at all, or the Jap newsdesks wouldn't be so insistent --- I would almost never chance to return to China or even Asia again, however early hostilities cease. I'd put more pounds on the chances of going over the mountains and down the jungle roads through Burma, if I were thirty years younger. Won't ride a sedan chair on another man's back now, though. As it is, it's down the Si to Hong Kong ---provided I finish the overland trek."

"Your worries are your only impediment, dear doctor. My assistant just came up the Yangtze and I myself am going down it shortly, with a boatload of gear."

"Confident that the kamikazes will recognise a German's crop cut --- or an Englishman's moustache --- among the masses?"

"Your consul, dear sir, will inform them of the time and place of your embarcation --- or would, of course, if Chinese telephones, telegraphs, mails, or anything else worked properly. You know yourself how probable that is... So if I might suggest, you would be far better off remaining right here in your accustomed territory, nearest the studies and sentiments of your life. Your citizenship can only be respected.

"And, of course, the prospect of this country's holding off against Japan any length of time is, conservatively, nil. Within perhaps nine months they will have conquered, and a military government will, for the first time in history, impose an efficient rule on an occupied China --- this wallowing dinosaur where all the laws of causality are violated simultaneously... Order will not be restored, but initiated. After that --- well, the interests of the Japanese in matters cultural, historic, and scientific is overwhelming --- far more so, as you are so painfully aware, than that of Kuomintang bureaucrats. Your researches --- and mine --- may at long last rein free of obstacles. Nor are the Japanese characterised by that incredible corruption which gums every level of life --- "

"I happen to like the Chinese," Vulliamy broke in testily; "they've been my people for thirty years."

"Of course, dear doctor, but you can not but admit the truth of what I say. History and evolution are as irresistible as inevitable; the weaker and less coherent cultures give way to the advanced whenever --- "

"An odd point of view to be put so calmly between two men who plumb and probe for the origins of a culture buried by so much battering from a horde of interlopers... and keep groaning, in vain, for those vestiges of its real base which, on that account, elude us."

"Only to become the more convinced of historical law."

With these interpolations Vulliamy had allowed himself several minor breaches of etiquette the better to save himself the greater of striking his guest's hard-lined face. He knew the Germans saw no inconsistency in devoting a supposed social call to bitter argument as long as no voice were raised, that the giving of offence was a routine component of social commerce. (Whenever the German commented on the relative freedom on the Bonpos to practise in Amdo, as they did not there suffer from the persecution of the Lamaists, Vulliamy would remind him "Under the Chinese," and Fleischhacker invariably nodded without irony.)

"In fact," the German was going on, "it may not be a year before you can travel directly to Lhasa yourself --- or I to Shang Shung."

"You don't mean the Japanese will invade Tibet?" No convention could disguise Vulliamy's alarm.

"Why --- a well-oiled machine must be kept in operation to obviate decay. And the onward course of progress over disorder, of historic inevitability, is the motive factor. I daresay we --- that it is as inevitable as the brain from a ganglion."

Vulliamy slumped back. He was too old to be held accountable for a stiff upper lip. It was the end of the day; he had of course been forced, once the gift had been made, to invite the German to dinner, and now he could not retract it; but to do an old man the deed of crushing his heart's bright jewels just before the light dies away from his eyes...

"Well, doctor, if you are determined to go, then perhaps I can mitigate to a degree your sense of loss." Vulliamy stared back dully. "I have been able to put in some time in the local Bon temple ---"

"Local Bon temple?"

Fleischhacker could not quite conceal a flush of satisfaction in playing this trump card. "You surely knew? After twenty years? There is one just in the hills behind the butcher section in Kuso --- Gyasho, to its populace --- all Tibetan."

"I know that, of course; my servants come from there. But I also know quite intimately its lama, and there has never been --- no mention, ever ---- " His disapointment was so intense it did not for a moment occur to him that the German might be misleading him. Most Tibetans were of course as repelled as he by the practices and principles of that unorthodox sect; even votaries would not readily admit its existence. The village was a crude one, the people there a far cry from the devout and cultured inhabitants of their high homeland; it was the local slum, the butcher quarter of Zizhong. A natural retreat, of course, for any pursuit likely to evolve bloodstains and cries at odd hours. Probably his informants among the Tibetans had been ashamed or afraid to mention it. For the first time in decades he was conscious of a veil between himself and the familiar landscape of Szechwan, but without any of the enticements it had flaunted when first perceived, at his arrival years before. Now it was cruelly opaque.

"I did not know," he went on, "that a temple was necessary for an open-air faith."

"Where or whether walls stand is of no more importance to the practice of my faith than yours, but there are advantages to having a barricade against the unsympathetic, especially in a strange land, as much as to be able to shut out the sun, create a lasting night --- or even to limit the penetration of given stars.

"You know of course that there are Bonpo monasteries throughout Tibet, with temples attached; that the demon-laden temples of the Lamaists are modelled on them. Fibres of word or faith interweave them with Shang Shung, so that the spirits alerted by pronouncements of the *Kyeddzog*'s assault-laden words need not wait for night to fall on the grimy roofs of Shang Shung to take on a structure from that darkness which is the common medium of earth and most other worlds --- need not rise with the smoke to hover above the planet as it wheels slowly beneath them, to descend and work as they have been directed... wherever there are cells of darkness, the darkness which governs time and force, there will be a conduit for their passage, not inferior to the speed of starlight by a day... so shadows of Shang Shung creep through those refuges faster than fire-wires through that blackness which is for ever in the underskin of the earth, to materialise in Berlin, or the abysses under London... to stopper those drains until the darkness for ever whirling into them can pond and flood..."

Vulliamy stared at him clinically, and Fleischhacker turned his tone smoothly. "Another item I think you will find of great interest, doctor. By a shortcut I have just had news out of the frontier near Amdo. The new Gyalwa R'impoche has been found. A two-year-old boy came running up the road near a lake to meet the searchers, as the last predicted on his death-bed... he has passed all the tests. The party awaits Chinese permission to return with him to Lhasa."

"How wonderful!" Vulliamy's eyes brightened at once, seeing no longer the artificially close-cropped head but the shaven pates of yellow-robed scholars, the splintered crags and ermine snows of the high plateau, the metallically vivid mountain lakes... a small boy, running in footsteps stamped by the destiny of centuries... a quiet lake, a quiet farm; loving faces watching... and the thunderbolt of law, of cause and comprehension, flickering tremendously through all the forms. The focus of a million hopes --- a chaplet of bodies giving putative permanence to what is requisite for and consoling to men... "How utterly wonderful!" Excitement voided his earlier aspersion against godhood.

Much more comfortable with his dinner, Vulliamy's sense of balance was to a degree restored when he left the house that night with Fleschhacker. The German insisted on walking, and on keeping their destination quiet. His servants in any case were finishing his personal packing. He was still chagrined, and steeled himself to walk into the purlieus of the unknown temple's bloodstained gods and devils with the attitude a sympathiser to Latins might carry into a bullfight.

The walk was long, but the night was cool. As the doctor's house was in a refined quarter on the southwest edge of town they met no crowds and were able to keep to semi-rural byways, and descended into the Tibetan slum from its wooded side, gripping walking-sticks against the expected rush of mastiffs; but it was peculiarly quiet. Beyond the squalid, corruptly sweet yards of the butchers they found it, hardly concealed among spindly poplars. Seen in the moonless darkness it was unprepossessing --- a simple black rectangle whose uptilted eaves brothered it with all the faiths of China.

"Surely this is a converted Taoist temple?"

"'Converted'?" It was a wry joke. "I daresay. But utterly, and long ago. Taoism is merely the scent left by a fiery philosophy kin to my own, in aboriginal times. The conventional furniture of their modern spookshow is gone from this one, however. Ornamenture is irrelevant to the purposes of the Bonpos, except what they can carry outdoors with them. But, as I say, this functions as a screen of sorts."

A thin, sly figure waited by the door where a single lantern burned, in the black robe and hat of a Bonpo priest. But Vulliamy knew him:

Zemdal: a gutter-rat familiar around Zizhong, with some reputation as a conjuror or exorcist. He bowed with dignity and protruded his tongue, sucking his breath, but Vulliamy could not see anything of the Tibetan physiognomy on him.

The interior gloom was red-tinged, as if torches burned behind scarlet glass. Yet there were no flames inside. The walls were painted black; aside from a low altar in the centre of the floor, decked with the essential appetising meats, and a couple of horse skulls, freakishly marked, at either end, there were no furnishings.

"I thought," he said rather dully, as he looked around disappointed, "that fire was an integral part of the procedure."

"And so it is, in whatever form," the German answered briskly. "The only eternal element, as Herakleitos said. Why, I would be justified in setting up a combustion motor! And indeed, even now they speak in Tibet of turning the Gelugpas' prayer wheels with one.

"A symbol of the annihilation of matter, and of light itself, speared out of the ovens of the time-flares... we use it to cleanse those elements antipathetic to the wills of the star-beings, and in return to represent the power and capacity of those stars. A sort of fuse to nuclear fire... and into this chamber starfire will be conducted, and focussed, so no lesser fire need be --- but sit down, doctor; there's no place but the altar-table but don't worry about your --- ah --- seat there --- as you can see I have mounted in the wall over the door the objective of a telescope left behind by a German expedition almost fifteen years ago. As the skies are clear, and there is no moon, you see the vague glimmerings of a number of stars being conducted inside the hallowed walls. But the principle is that the star in question must be selected for, brought forcibly into, the ceremonial chamber; this is what the modern Bonpos have lost the secret of --- though there were some remarkable inventions in old Tibet, doctor --- and today they only hold a punctured helmet of sorts over the material to be invested, little knowing or caring whether the light of the actual star passes through. It has to be amplified in some physical way. You are aware that not only the most pagan temples but also churches are oriented, as a rule, and some stellarented or matched to nascent planets. This one, I find, is aligned to the rising of Aldebaran. That touch of redness which begins to perfuse the temple marks its entry into the lens-field; its light will fill the temple in half an hour."

"I'd hardly think a polytheist would need to be so exclusive."

"A man who needs to summon courage or indifference to pain in a given situation may not be incapable of love or leisure but does not spare them time in that situation. To draw upon a particular source of power makes the others superfluous --- even disturbing --- for the duration. The necessity when invoking Dragmar --- excuse me, the Red Tiger Devil you know of is in fact this same ruddy Aldebaran --- the names representing these relentless energies are purely facultative, of course --- is to restrict one's sensory environment to those stimuli occasioned by its light, to those specific receptors in the human brain --- just as our electrical voices are disturbed by the ejaculations of our own sun, which we would shield against if we could.

"All men, you see, are linked to the stars, but the king lights of heaven can be magnified only over those able to bear their specific caress; otherwise is madness. When a man can come to grips with the image of a star-being he is a man no longer: he comes to know the stirring of winged serpents under his calvarious crown, owns the power to raise storms and darkness, to puppet corpses and chew off their tongues, to drive lava through the mountains or traverse the dark unlimited wounds of Agartha --- not in imagination or drug hysteria, doctor, but *in the fact of the flesh* --- only if they practice this momentous ritual, the significance of which is for the most part long forgotten."

A scarlet bead was now appearing, much distorted, in the circular glass newly fixed in the roof; clumsy signs of carpentry evidenced the haste and recency with which it had been placed. A red ferocity drilled through into the room with sudden brutal force, and washed the black chamber with bloody fire. Inch by inch the image grew, and the strobe-like glare increased.

Fleischhacker was walking around the altar, indicating one or another vacuous point as he spoke. "There are other gods --- Tamdin in fact is Rigel, bDudgontragsag better known as Sirius, kZen'chen as Betelgeuse, and so on. It's not important. Each has its attributes and is sought for a good, distinct reason. I find that one has so much to explore even in a single orb that it is best to specialise... so I wash myself in the blood of Aldebaran."

With the heat of strain and conflict the heavens' red semaphore flashed full through the glass, weaving around but never settling into a perfect mandala, its twinkling swollen to stunning iosis, dropped to clotted shadow, three pairs of eyes torched and dowsed.

Sitting on the altar, turning over in his hands the golden mask the German had insisted on his bringing along, surrounded by still-steaming meats, Vulliamy had twisted himself disconsolately so as to look directly into the lens, and was helpless when the German and conjuror together seized his wrists and ankles and stretched him out on the block, binding him tight and to the block with tough strings of elaeocarpus beads which they had been rattling in their hands, rosary-fashion.

Calmly, once he had secured the old man's body, Fleischhacker placed the yellow mask over the owner's empurpled face. "The mask --- and thus the god --- Todtug," he said. "Ego baptizo te Todtug." Vulliamy's last coherent thought was to question this unheard-of deity. But Fleischhacker rose and took from his accomplice's hands an elaborate mask of black silk, riddled through with gold and scarlet lines developing from an interlinked abstract geometry into the swastika. Zemdal drew a plain mask over his own unexpressive features.

"With the mask --- one becomes the being. Ordinarily, the presumptive emissary or gate-opener to the star is given a special sacramental drink which, like the participatory tsampa of the Lamaist sabbats, is spiked with mandrake. One's harsh awareness of the external panorama is mollified by the inner one it paints.

"But I am sure, dear doctor, that you will not wish to miss a single detail of the oncoming transaction, never before witnessed by an Englishman. It will be a first for both of us, actually; my black-hatted mentors never allowed me to participate --- much less officiate --- in a sacrifice, other than those of lower animals, insistent as they were that I memorise both theory and ritual with precision. There is a foresight there which you unfortunately will not be able to appreciate, but I can at least crown your life's labours by sharing with you the outward appearance of the secret rite. To add to that, I am violating, here, one of the precepts of my faith in fulfilling one of yours: I give you the powers of a god. To wear the mask is to become the god, and deicide is far more potent than mere murder. We shall see whether, without its accompanying light, your god is able to equal the powers of mine; and will see whether, like your own deity, you are strong enough to shrug off death. It is a purely scientific experiment --- granting the dispassion of physics to theology. Your character is more open to deeper approaches to the cosmos than, say, a yak-herder plucked at random... so the outcome is quite... unpredictable. But if it succeeds ... I promise vast consequences for the world .... "

As he spoke he lifted a heavy mallet, and walked around Vulliamy systematically breaking each segment of his arms and legs, thigh and shin, wrist and ankle, hand and foot. Sparing only the attention required by the fissioning and pollarding of his body, he broadcast the words of an invocation precise to syllable and accent, with an ingrained thoroughness. Like slime the amorphous star-glitter crawled across the lens, its red freight ebbing and flowing around them.

"The gods of the stars, the spirits of avalanches and wild waters, the flapping skeletons of fire, understand and live in the hills and eddies of my thoughts: if I break my fealty, I will break that link which my mind has forged with those swelling states of being which author all my acts, and they will rend my body and all its parts to fragments even as I rive this one I give... weld myself to them with draughts of blood-life here unleashed, as in their burning arcs they pass on life and, drinking the same, are thus preserved for ever..."

What followed would have been of clinical interest to Vulliamy, but once Fleischhacker ripped into his abdomen with a clumsy Khamba knife and twisted the blade his taut body gave up its tension. The strains which spread then over his pale clothing seemed foreign and incorporeal under the buffering red light, but in a few minutes the aromatic meats were engrossed by grasping filaments of blood, and the encirclement of redness was complete.

Zemdal had assisted with the impassive disinterest of any paid servant at his commission, but the German, electric as polar air, had a deeper concern both in the procedure and in modifications of his sensory input. Continuing his words once a final thrust had been bestowed into his victim's throat, he had to remember to lap some of the blood as the rest fountained upward, and to swallow some of the flesh from each incision; but he was a punctilious anthropologist. A trail of viscera lifted on his sword-point made a perfunctory arc toward heaven and limped downward, and the sweet savour of the meats was stifled by the raw upwelling of butchery.

The air sated, the clatter of words too ended on an interrogative note. The baleful rubescence began tampering with terrestrial nerves in ambivalent ways; Fleischhacker, as if to pierce his victim's entrails with his eyes, exerted his powers as he had never done before, feeling augmented with more wills than his body owned, hoisting himself above the plane where his body dangled inert as an anchor, and waited with the open arms of mind for the descent of the profound.

* * *

Though he had lost all sense of direction, stark terror kept him at a floundering, full-speed run through the darkness, clambering over and around evanescent elements he could not see and dared not spend time to trace out. Everything was phantom except his panic: that was clear and solid: a swarm or pack of pursuers who might be scattered along his wake, or just as easily be netting him in the formlessness ahead. They were relentless; there was no hope of resting. His fear swept out to include all the bodies, animate and inanimate, in this part of the world --- his horror was bottomless and without dimensions --- he *had* to avoid being caught --- by eye, tendril, or stone.

Perhaps dissident moonbeams winked through the fog, perhaps abandoned stars; it was unthinkable that they could be roving eyes, for they were much too mobile ---he could rather imagine that the eyes of his trackers had belched out all this scattered greyness, their breath rank as the miasm of deep caverns. As if a giant rolled, the world shifted beneath his feet, and he slipped and fell, screaming --- but the dimness sponged up all sound. Sliding hopelessly he came to abrupt rest in the closure of a score of scaly hands which had him secured before he could slow his spinning brain: he screamed again and again, but his screams were clouds of froth.

A darker hulk of faces and hunched, abangular shoulders hemmed him in now, while the twisted hands, some pulpy as corpse-fat and some bony as a skeleton's, tore off his clothes and ran all over his naked skin, leaving snailwakes of horripilation. He heard no heartbeats and felt no warmth from their slickness, yet the substance pulsed.

Once he had recovered enough to struggle he was firmly pinioned, his clubbed fists forced open by relentless vises. They tapped for blemishes or deformities --- their own irregular movements and cramped dimensions expressing all possible malformation --- and of course there were none: he had always prided himself on his physical excellence; now it was a source of anxiety. He knew they took only the unmarred for the sacrifice...

When they tied him up they did so painstakingly and with padded bonds to conserve his skin. He took advantage of one loose moment to bite his captor's arm savagely, but could not follow through the attack: the alkaline ichor which ran down his throat was so vile he was queasy and weakened at once, and when they only gagged him without kicking or slapping in return, he knew. Still in the gloom, he felt his hands and ankles drawn apart, stretched, felt pressure at both ends as if he were being hauled apart; but it was not that strong.

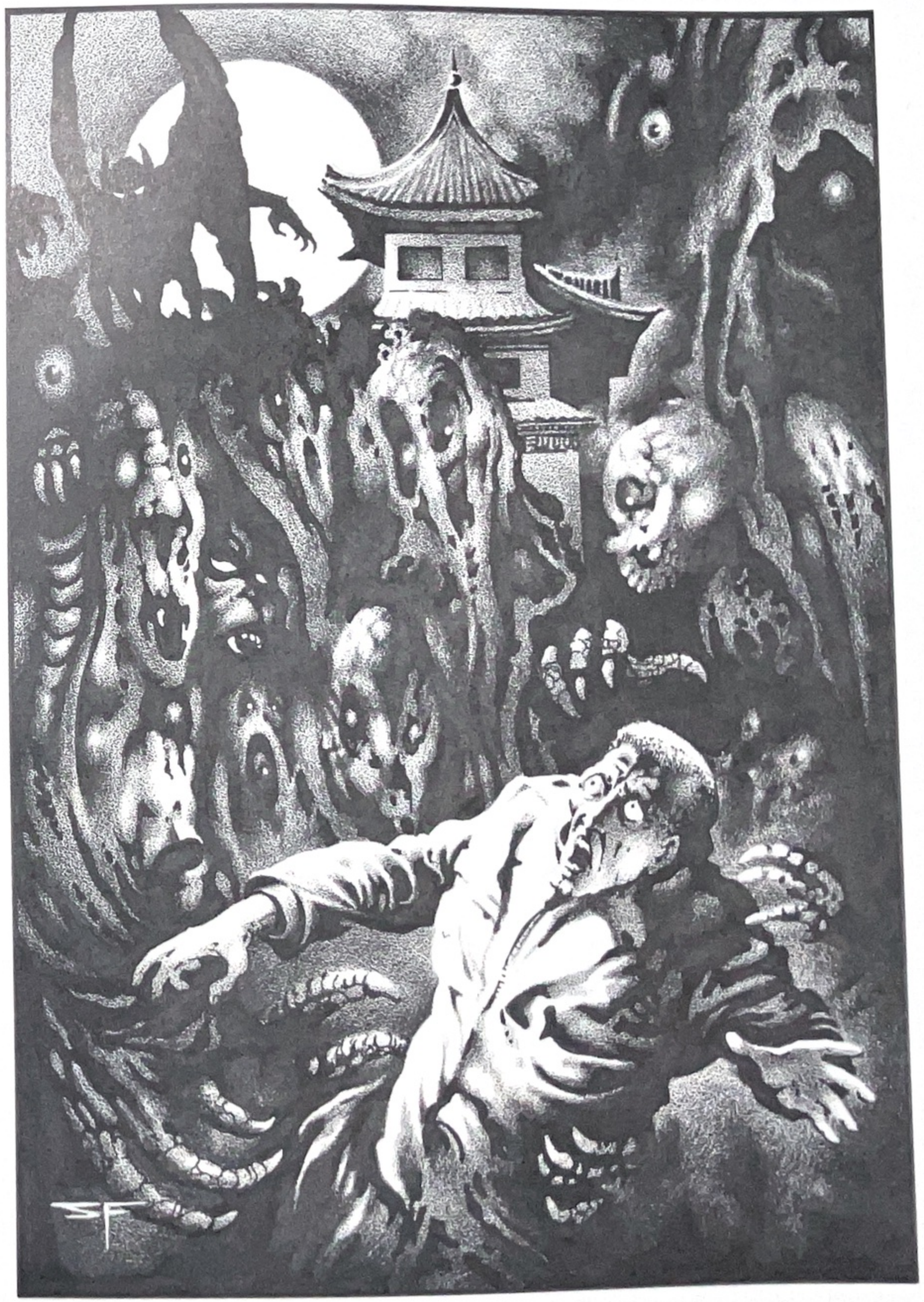
He was moving through a tangible ooze of neutral light. How exactly he was not sure; --- perhaps he slid along some semiliquid medium, for he felt a cold friction on his skin; but he was not jogged or jolted as he would have been if carried, and the pressure remained equal at both ends of his body. He could not say if he were moving forward, upward, or down. The elongation deceived him in other ways as well --- at times he seemed to be stretching, expanding, perhaps enough to meet and overpower the star-glares which alone persisted --- if such they were.

His eyes served as ears, since whatever had turned the air grey had also cut its arterioles of sound. When the first rumble of storm arrived then it flickered as a yellowish light, convulsing the greyness, until beams of spectral lightning flashed and sustained themselves around him; there was a growing whirl of colours, spreading into new dimensions in his brain.

The whole greyness bellied up then as if rent by waterspouts, and burst into a storm of airfire. An auroral fever at first only sparked zigzags around him, but at last nuzzled him, permeated him, bursting into depths and wholenesses acceptable only to otherwise untouched convolutions in his brain. When it became whole in him he thought of the withering punishment with which he would treat the slugs who had bound him up, how he would spread the transfiguration of St. Elmo across the face of moons and earths...

And realised that the liberating light came *from* him as well as *to* him, in response to his terror and his will. He searched alert for those blasphemous beings who had borne him to the slaughter. That there were flat waxen discs somewhere below, like the corpses of guttered candles, he understood --- similarly that his bonds had been abolished, though in the exultation of his sudden growth and in the bodily surge of opal fire he had given no thought to moving arms or legs. Now it was not necessary. When he wished to bring a vassal into access for destruction he had only to warp the space in which the offender stood.

Haloed with a crackling aura, he felt himself rising, less a body than a staggering electrical field, the whole of the violent radiance bounded by his skin: but now the greyness divided, formed clouds at both hands, and against the left of these he saw projected a Brocken-spectre which drew back, as he did, to swear itself a puppet. Below, too, at the foot of an escarpment of something on which his feet must be resting, was a lake covered with clouds, clouds agitated as the water itself; and there, too, his distorted shadow watched him. Somewhere far off he could see a pale and glowing huddle of volumes which must have been a city,



without harsh lines or corners, though bursts of mist and fog concealed it intermittently.

Where were the twin suns or moons which could so multiply his own shadow? As he wondered --- abstractedly --- he saw a cold corona shimmer about his Brocken-spectre, a living iris enclosing it in a coat of many colours; then the shadow itself began to shimmer like fractured lithoxylon. His own body, perfect, flawless, expanding now still, cast off its light, the light it had drunk from the empyrean; all shadows become only an acknowledgement of his incandescent brain. The *true* sacrifice --- the ultimate sacrifice --- meant apotheosis: sacrifice of the definitions of the lesser world, its constraints... he had become the power his now unneeded minions had so blindly served, had been chosen to rule over them, lifted free and high from among their idiot bonds.

When he raised his right arm the Brocken-phantoms showed him even before he felt it that the sacrificial sword was already in his hand. As much a part of his grip as his wrist with his forearm, it fitted into his being and his purpose... all things of the universe toward which he had gravitated were now made part of him, by their conquest he was made whole --- wills wheeled to his will, the power that rioted in him, the power of suns and nights, breaths and orbits, mountain-rifts and inverted time.

When they first came into sight he was waiting for them, the shivering, hesitant masses of men and women and children who were herded out of the dimness, from the direction of the cloud-scarved city, all ugly, deficient --- dwarfed, twisted, blind or lame, hunchbacked or melon-bellied, some cicatrised and some circumcised, birthmarked, tattooed, tettered --- all urged on by some being or flail beyond his gaze or interest, which made itself known in the rustle of wings or the clashing of scales.

That there was a face over there--- perhaps beyond or perhaps above the city, whose contours made its shoulders --- he did not doubt until the circuits of his smouldering brain were chilled by its gaze: then he knew it was illusion, still another reflection of his own. His attention was below, at the masses swarming now like insects around his distant feet, unable even to clasp his ankles, ignorant of the colossal bulk above them. Ill, bulging, ragged, hairless or ape-pelted, they milled pointlessly in search of some mark, some signpost, some resting place --- and there was none.

His arm rose and the glittering mantle of many colours swelled, ingested the spectrum of the universe, and the shadow of the sword came between the suns which spouted from his sockets and the trammelling below. Their light cut off, they fell silent.

He had no need to speak: any mouth, anywhere, would open at his will and erupt his words, articulate eternities --- volcanoes would give up their lava, graves their miscreant mortalities, if he but bobbed his will; he could breed words which would open all mists into the terrifying vertigo of the void which he alone encompassed and plumbed. His words would smash skulls, sever torsos, sear memories and wisdoms out of glutinous brains more efficiently than knives or stakes, drown the highest mountains of the wildest moons in foam, whip the flotsam of all suns to orgy.

With all the firmament thus wrapped in his rays he would summon shadows from the pantheon within his skull, parade them full-fleshed and powerful across the walkways of the worlds, gigantising them as he wished, afflicting them with putrescence when he tired, speaking his words in a hundred and thirty trillion tongues ...painting all the destinies in all the colours visible and invisible that he moulded. Each word, each sound, each aspiration, could put a torch even to men's unborn thoughts, tear peace from its soft grey bedding in their heads.... *I am made death, the shaper of worlds....*

Nevertheless as they quailed mewing below he roared, "It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God!"

II

With some impatience David Daldzoron followed the waiter to a brightly lit table in the corner, out of sight of the lake. There were few guests and it was practice at such times to set only scattered tables; but the rest were at the veranda railing, enjoying a spectacular view of ebony water seasoned with stars and the looming volcanoes silhouetted in zodiacal light. This one, alone, was shut off from both the sky-glow and cool breezes by the inner wall.

A white-haired man was already sitting there; David had learned the Latin refusal of solitude whether it was desired or not. A request for a separate table, in the other's presence, was the grossest misbehaviour. Yet the other one's lifted face, unflatteringly illuminated by the strong overhead lamps, hardened at sight of David's, the eyebrows lifted in surprise. David had endured several insults

already that day and was in an exacerbated state of disquiet; he did not hide his recoil. At once the other half-rose, as if apologetic, and gestured David into the opposite seat with formality.

And David sat, considering across the breadth of a table the man he had wished first to study from a distance. But he had no chance to show either annoyance or pleasure, since the other spoke at once in a harsh accent, "Cornelius von Uexkull, sir, at your service. You prefer English? French? Port --- "

"English is about it."

"Then I suggest we speak softly, as it is not a popular language in Guatemala just now. Though perhaps you are American?"

"Virtually." David hesitated and then bore ahead. "My parents are Tibetan, though; I was born in Sikkim just before the war --- " the other man's face froze for a breath --- "but I've lived most of my life in the United States; my father is a professor there."

"Are you staying some while in Guatemala?"

"No, just passing through. Just finished my M. Sc. in palaeontology and in a month I'll be in the field on the eastern shoulder of the Andes. Are you at all acquainted with the geology of the mountains around here?"

"I regret not," Von Uexkull rasped as if with the obligatory dismay that he could not so far play the flawless host. "I have made some efforts to survey them in the past, but --- " he gestured inward to indicate his age.

David was struck mostly by the man's frame, which was heavy, uncompromisingly firm, but expressionless as his face, and by his clothes, which were calculated to give the impression of shabby gentility --- worn spots being virtually displayed --- but were in fact of an expensive make. It was an inversion of the customary exile. His face was haggard and his voice thin, as if operating on a peeled larynx; a nervous tic frolicked over faded eyes, but the eyes themselves had nothing weak or absent about them. Each time they crossed David --- and they did so frequently --- there was an expectant challenge quivering in his face.

"You have lived here long?"

"Many years. Many years. At one time I did some prospecting, and found a few fossils, but with no references here, no training --- so isolated --- they were of little use."

"Do you have any interest in Precambrian fossils?"

The German seemed relieved at the drift of the conversation, though he stiffened again when David leant forward slightly to take from his pocket a lucite block in which hovered a small slice of raw stone minted with a frozen dervish-circuit of rusted lines; yet, once David handed it across, he fixed the specimen with more than polite interest.

"The most interesting thing about the traces of Precambrian organisms, of course, is that their templates lie so far back in time, among varieties and populations so restricted, that the chances are always good that any single *Eosphaera* or *Fibularix* or *Parvancorina* might actually belong to an individual scarred on one's own family tree. All the modern forms, shaped by the adversities of a seething world, came out of them; that polymathic acid keeps seeping into, exploring, conquering, ever more difficult niches, and is carried down through the eons in such simple packages as this. All the yawing from form to form, seeking some kind of stability, of rest, of perfection --- transforming oneself over and over for ever in the search --- the bare complexity of this husk you see hardly suggests how much must have stormed within it. However much life writhes under the whipping of the sun--- or the suns of deep space --- it always leaves behind an inscription quiet as a tombstone. What I find remarkable is the fact that all these currents influencing the shape and force of bodies were just as potent, just as vicious, in the primal world; all the violences of the universe sported then as they do now. Without any of our specialised organs, receptors, or effectors, these simple creatures were adjusted in equally simple ways to the same adversaries --- you wonder if their experiences were not as meaningful as ours, don't you? --- and survived, passed the torch, secreted a world-shell of oxygen and ozone to shield us from the worst tantrums of the skies ... making it more habitable, paradisiacal, less problem-fraught, so we could continue the search for the more perfect state, the ultimate rest... still living and breeding in our usual misdirection, perhaps ourselves able to do no more than produce some substantial, worldwide change which will protect our own issue more thoroughly, catalyse their final evolutionary triumph.

"Isn't it a pity we can't find some equally trustworthy, equally legible imprint, in some enduring matrix, to show what we must ultimately become --- how successful we will finally be in fitting into the universe?"

"No."

David put the block down on the table at an angle to the German, so that it reflected the stars and sheen from beyond the veranda while remaining distinct itself, reanimated with static lights.

The soup had been set before them, and the German picked up his spoon; a tiny chorus of red glows winked on the fingers of his left hand --- a series of rings each set with a stone of that deep pink onyx the Mexicans call jade. On his right glimmered an antiphony in black.

"Very valuable stones --- nearly flawless, unmarbled," David commented mildly, wondering whether his opponent could still read the expressions of a high-altitude face. "Did you get them locally?"

"No. What is the age of that fossil?"

"Beltian --- not quite a billion years. Interestingly --- " they sat under fierce illumination, but in the moonless skies the greater magnitude stars competed successfully for notice; David gestured to a specific red point --- "that far red star --- Aldebaran, in the Hyades --- turns out, with its train, to be just a little less than a thousand million years in age. Unusually young for a star, I believe? Huge and powerful as it is, those violence-inducing red rays have been flowing down on us through zero space all the years this ancestral indiscretion was flowing through the darkness of the rock. About the same time these bland, microscopic lives first began to castramete themselves, look inward, and thicken outward on the upward road to imagination and ideal, those rays began their trillion-mile journey .... a hundred and thirty some years .... and somewhere met and joined the blind tropisms which were converted into the calculations and compassions of beings able to reshape worlds."

Without having lifted his soupspoon to his mouth, the other one sat quite still, his two banks of gems and the star-mirroring fossil facing each other in a chatoyant triangle, a funnel from David's quiet mouth.

"Recently I see that another scientist has again claimed to have reanimated tiny organisms from salts of almost as great an age, brought back to life the earth-lords of the foul-smelling dawn --- insignificant pigmies now --- superannuated capsules of the simplest and most basic urges. They turned out to be so hopelessly innocent of all the poisons and trickeries woven during the intervening ages that they could defend themselves from nothing, not daily life itself; almost any secretion from any modern cell --- the most trivial of environmental furniture --- killed them.

"Much good it will do these humourists who show their own incapacity to adapt to the universe by attempting to have their bodies frozen through cycles of further evolution for some hazy resuscitation... the tears or sweat of our own posterity may do the same to them!

"But considering that those red rays have been witness to all the hate, struggle, pain, lust, ego, and purposelessness of the earth--- do you wonder sometimes whether they began first to blaze coincidentally with the uplifting of life from the slough of simplicity --- or whether their blazing forth may not rather have effected that peculiar, fateful step. Has that star been a smouldering monitor --- or a cosmic Svengali?"

Von Uexkull's lips trembled as a waiter, glancing at each of them, removed the untasted soup and deposited rice and mashed beans. He broke from the hypnotic fascination of David's words long enough to look around vaguely, as if forgetting that he was supposed to be searching out the exits; then his eyes fell to the fossil. He straightened and cleared his throat. "You ignore the fact that the life of this earth is utterly dependent upon that red frequency, sir. It may be violence-inducing, as you say --- I am not ignorant of animal psychology --- to the advanced primate brain; but it also excites to progressive action. And without it, even the sustenance of green fields, the solace of opening blossoms, would be voided ... if the loneliest and basest life-sprinkles of past and present suck their nourishment from those weird hot colours we can not even see, you must surely allow that it is the dependents of the rose-colour which have triumphed...which rule... dominate the changing scene. No," more briskly, "if horror be granted it is merely that for so much of its season that red star you refer to passed on a sterile sweep of sweetness which went unheeded by sheets of slime incapable of echoing it with rainbows. The redness of violence is like the redness of skies over a distant conflagration, a cast-off of frenetic activity. No, no light... no light... could instigate that... meaningless... floundering up on the rocks... perhaps... perhaps it was that ruby glow which... which finally evoked the soft pleasures of forest-fabrics, feather-fatui, across the harsh crags of the land... which ended --- not began --- the blind puling horror you speak of."

"Even *that* ruby glow?" David again referred to Aldebaran with his knuckles --- one of which bore a curious green stone itself --- quite at home with the suddenly theatrical language; the German stiffened upright. "After all, the sun grants us enough redness to suckle a whole planet, but presents a face of immitigable yellow --- a rather useless colour by itself, as I understand it, among the living; its one distinction seems to be that it alone is universally perceptible, even to the colour-blind ... as inert as the gold it bred. The blood-sparking redness it has to offer defers to a blandness developed, like wisdom, by old age. A star still smouldering with youth has no such inhibitions....

"So those luminous clots of blood and amber and the rainbowed *mamarrachada* down here are intimately linked, aren't they? Each one adds its quantum of fatal energies to the sum which rains on us, and light and life renew their intimate alliance. So you have to grant that the struggle and the murdering, the inverted pyramid of death and horrors, is an inevitable outcome of the progress toward the sweetness you speak of --- its viscera, in fact. If there is no life without red light, there is too no horror, no pain. You know of course the literal, as well as the connotative, meaning of the word lucifer?

"Since in darkness everything is potential --- substance rather than surface --- it is light which costumes and masks the actors of epic plays, which so seldom end as anything but tragedies. We call things by the colours they cast off; what they absorb is what we do not see. So light is the garment of deceit --- the weapon of the King of Lies, isn't it?"

"The King? Weapon of --- " Ashen, Von Uexkull with sudden elderly panic glanced around him, seeing, apparently, barriers that were not there. His eyes could move no farther than the lines laid down by his rings and the fossil. Yet the waiter was again at his table with two armfuls of steaming plates, and he said nothing, made no effort to rise. David's voice, smooth and steady enough to reassure the Guatemaltecan, flowed on without a break, and the man hovered over them dutifully until Von Uexkull showed some signs of relaxation, had slipped back into the eddy of sound.

"That Joseph's-coat that is flung into your brain makes many chameleon flutters between mask and eye, eye and brain. The lapping plasma of those red giants cascades into space and works its proper will faster and more vastly than any other kind of star, whether for feast or for fury... yet it gives no visible sign; its impact on us is negative. If it is richer with life-potential, as you say, it nevertheless is the quintessence of violence and destruction. Isn't this perhaps symptomatic of the empery of those red flambeaux over the holocaust we live in?"

" --- the widowed elements --- " Von Uexkull husked involuntarily.

"I have wondered whether the suns themselves do not maintain a conspiracy, breaking up the unities of the universe into a seeming multitude of shapes and individualities; we come out of darkness and go into darkness and both remember and anticipate pure feeling, pure being, as we know it there; all the distractions and deceits between self and being are interposed by light for the finite times it creates and claims... "

" --- the flapping tatters ---"

" --- knowing only the echoes and harmonics of realities, aping them in shapes as music does in sounds, we carve our way with dreams back into the ecstasy beyond surfaces --- "

" --- the spinning chaplet of the depths --- "

" --- and take off the panoply of masks. Even that --- " again a gesture to Aldebaran, "even that red tip that smoulders down upon us may have ceased to exist already, exploded to nova, imploded to neutrons; but the black cylinder which would then roll behind it will be masked by that Tyrian face for many human generations --- the span of a wholeness of our acquired knowledge. The heavens are as deceitful as the bodies of the earth, aren't they?"

Von Uexkull's face was curiously stiff, as with the mechanical rather than the emotional vesture of fear; there was still formidable strength behind his eyes, his jaws. David spoke with no tone of impatience, antipathy, or forgiveness; there was nothing the German could fight with knife or even rudeness, no avenue to counterattack; as if several different realisations had come to him at once he sat motionless, serpents of suspicion flicking out the dilated pupils of his eyes, lapping fiery venom from his skull. David, already surprised at the restraint that governed him, continued, probing for the nerve.

"If the whole host of heaven burst at once into nothingness --- " But the German interrupted in a startlingly normal voice, "The laws of probability are quite against it."

"The hosts of earth have been violating the laws of probability for four billion years or so," David went on calmly; "the starsphere is probably capable of a good deal more. So if, I say, they foundered, we would sit here placidly all unknowing, basking in their ghost light all our allotted years, until the *Panmegas tethneke* of the cosmos burst on our children stunningly, inch by igneous inch. Even our own sweet nectar-brewing sun could deceive us for eight minutes... and eighteen seconds."

Von Uexkull's reflex glance at his watch seemed less to check David's admittedly incredible punctuality than from fear of a more subtle attack from the core of time. The other diners had left or were out of sight; the waiter removed the uneaten food and brought nothing more. The cleared tabletop became an arena in which the lights dabbled and drawn across the glassy face of the ancient minuscule body and those deflected at all angles from the caustic glitter of the gems countered and interpenetrated, a maze of pencilled flickering. David sat back, relaxed, but there was something in the pattern, or its fancied extension into space, which held Von Uexkull stunned, crouched, all mechanisms of action cauterised from his brain. The crisp fossil was vivified again by a slow circulation of sky- and lake-abstracted phosphors, altered its questing output minute by minute. In the harder, unliving or not-yet-living crystals, a counterpoint woke.

When the other spoke again the huskiness in his throat had eased to an oily rumble, as if a defensive compound had been injected from some unknown gland.

"Yet the vapour of the sun --- the vapour of the body --- is not so illusory as to burn no wake of emptiness through space... nor so juggernaut as to waste itself so, without result."

"Provided, of course, you speak of a burning orb, and not the pallid ghost of one... and of a genuine destruction --- not one which reverts to hard lights and bodies after it has been imagined."

Some of the human cosmetic went out of Von Uexkull's words; the answer, a fibreless litany, seemed forced from him, through to its end. "No way to doubt... the feel... have to wrestle with that ... protean fire-devil ... tumultuous veins brimming with slime... in his own element... clouds that shadow ... furnaces that grow ....

"I saw a tide of dead stars, cascading across the dropping moon... saw the lies written across time and space in the cinder-cells of the burnt-out dragons... saw masks of teeming earths... the worms in braincells and destinies... the glorious gold and silver of flawless artistries sinking, melting into the black abysses... hearts still squirting out their lives in the ylem-pulse's rhythm, thronging in behind, to fall like meteors and blow... I saw great titans, the shadows of my fears and joys, lengthen in the evening... on lakes of utter death... the twitching tongue of brass... that utterance of great things and blasphemies rise up and walk the orbits of the worlds... that pouring-out of abortions from the misshapen mouth, *his* thoughts not stretching *in* the evening but *as* the evening... the last light dying under the last darkness... drinking in that sanguine river bridle-high and mountain-long ... the howling, yawping things which... all the things... ideals and shapes... evolve into ... glimpse... beyond your words! ... as a bubble wins through to the surface of a hot mud --- in the endless curve of that bloody sweat --- a real Satan, damn you, twinkling in the cosmic furnace ... "

"Whatever words you use for the unnamable fail because they come from the earth-bound body you claim to have conquered... but also the words, the thoughts, the responses you gave to the whole massive horror are so bounded, and so must fail as well. Is a star affected by your lust for power? Invention of a self-Satan is a necessary by-product of self-justification. You find what you search for; you see your illusions given body by yourself, mirrored from nebulae and the blacknesses of the cosmic mystery. Testaments to gods, devils, godlessnesses and imp-voids are as numerous as contradictory; the universe remains a consistent whole. Who looks up at gods and down at devils has drawn into himself a spherical mirror.

"That red aperture you appeal to, see at the rim of space, is a hole in the back of your own skull... "

"Hopeless... all the worlds are enfolded with those... red tentacles... malignity seeps into the brain of any man who takes a minim of its light into his eyes or skin... the blind can feel, suffer... all blood simmers in its pristine colour... a hole your worlds can fall through! A whole which answers your brain with the suttee of a planet!"

"You credit it all to that umbilical of blood a hundred and thirty light-years long? Draw your strength, your nerve, from that inflammation --- say its convoluted gases swell and direct your muscles? Hasn't it in fact sucked away everything which made you properly human --- an animal of this earth --- fed on whatever kept you from descending to a rampant beast? With all that digested identity still present, there, inside, reclaimable... "

"Could I say then... I wish... nothing so much as that ... every star fattened on man's burgeoning failures... should wipe itself from the slate of existence?"

"Being mortal they will, of course, do so --- with or without judicial synchronisation."

Yet there was a suggestion, in the German's sudden slumping of character, that the charade had run through, that some agent both flesh and more was making itself known. Nor was all the suffering mock-human. Loathed and sought for a medley of crimes so enormous that those David knew of were insignificant by comparison, he, the embodied horror, the architect of fear, disclosed a relict vein of both fear and horror. For a decade which had been immeasurable to those who lived it, he had perpetrated, revelled in, a bottomless bestiality, as the earth accounted such things --- become superhuman in his indifference to all cosmic and human consequences --- and surely the confrontation with death had been given an agnostic toothlessness, the likelihood of abscissions from his body demoted to a surgical inconvenience. Parched landscapes wavering with flame, rustling with dried human flesh, had been the park of his evening strolls; great beasts under dragon banners, at whose orgiastic depredations the world had paled, paled themselves to pettiness beside the industries of this one. Probably he would lead his final hunters on a purely perfunctory chase.

Yet the conjunction of imitated, falsified stars, absorbed by an ancient, breathless body, and stones whose occult facets processed light into strange dimensions, returned it reversed --- more, perhaps, than the dispassioned knowing of the face before him, the spirit visible to him now despite the rarity of its race and age--- kept him tied; even opened his mouth. David was riding the forward thrust of a power he did not himself understand, which was large-external.

"You look at me," David said, "as if convinced that if you could pull away this face you would find behind it one you recognised. Was this often your experience in scraping off a multitude of human faces?"

"All of them masks... and yet the only face ... "

"Was that particular mask no alien to the face?"

"Hunger, power can write in a mask as much as in a face..."

"Evades my question. You saw expression in a ball of red fire, a film of yellow silk... you, who wrenched faces off so many, --- how many was it? thirty-seven thousand? --- did you leave that fragile film unexplored?"

"I feared no face... just its hunger..."

"Did you look behind it?"

"Madman, you know... you know what passed through that mouth... what would have blasted from it had it been detached, lifted even a hairsbreadth... "

"And a hand strengthened with a dose of starfire and so gargantuan a ration of daily blood hesitated at a rag of yellow silk?"

"No! The first time --- I looked up and ---"

"And then away. Did you look down to the teeming hordes around your feet and find yourself there too?"

Von Uexkull lowered his face to his hands. "Fool... I was there, in the chamber... at its right hand... *my* face did not leave my head ... the mask lives and drank... went its way ... drank and lived... there was no face."

"Drank --- blood?"

"Of course."

"Daily?"

"Without cease."

"So it was not the ripping away of faces. You squeezed blood from the bodies of the sacrifices?"

"Of course... squeezed it, wrung it, pumped it, gouted it from them... daily before *its*--- mask... rooted out their eyes, pineals, pituitaries, brains, skins, spleen, and bone-mush ... pulped and pounded, mashed and fed..."

"All of it stirred together --- decanted, drop by drop, through the mouth?"

"Pumped... under high pressure... was so much, so many... a non-stop roaring red geyser ... didn't even realise it at first... at first only the chamber, underground... sunlight fenced away with brass... until we realised... the large volume... and the whole complex, nautilus-mazed, had to follow... the place which had become the centre of the world... "

"Yet you said all of this --- dismembering, processing --- took place within that chamber, within sight of the mask?"

"Everything inside the brass ambit was in its... sight... so many steps were needed, we had to... to prepare the minds and bodies of those coming still from far off... "

"So this chamber was big enough to accommodate hundreds? --- for the whole --- process?"

"Big enough? Star-quarters? ... We had dynamos there to generate the whole spectrum ... an energy-source not soon to be repeated on this planet... plastered even those our eyes can not acquire over the walls, the instruments, the bodies of those coming in... once everything was underway they thought we worked in darkness, but we too could see what the stars paint... the darkness of viperlight and xempyre, stingblind and sioprhode, interlayered the red and yellow ribbons on the walls... a backdrop of joscene, zomute... bodies zebraed with saffron and indigo also bore stygop and carcoxanth... even the machinery, the draperies..."

"Pyrotechnic, chromogenic machinery... inquisitorial implements... you speak of great things... and blasphemies... so those eye-negating colours then burned away their sight and skins to maul bare blood?"

"No... no, they had to be alive and whole when put into the presses, under the knives... so the death-hues were accordingly restrained ... the minds had to be pounded into matrix along with the shrieks they fruited... even the great brazen pans somehow held echoes captive through the unclocked hours... that's why it was needful for those next to come to be at work there, too, to hear the whole unleashing, secrete greater fears and horrors to blend with their pulps and humours... gold and gore, day after day, geometrically mountainous... for it swallowed only a colloid of gold and silver, a most exacting formula, in that rare fluid of life, of being, of dreams... it took phlebotomes of iron, cauldrons of brass..."

"Then the very men who moved these props, manned your murders, were those who were next to suffer them?"

"Yes... with the glittering gold pulsing light into the blood which was to be fed ... within the ambit of the splashing blood... they laboured in their turn... with the wholeness of it seen by them before they went down to oneness with it... the presses, the blenders, the light-machinery... under absent-minded eyes and whips... each was served in turn. The conjunctions and transformations all had to be performed at the same time, so as to do violence to every spark and bond within the brain, to charge the atmosphere... to free minds from those pointless chords of sphere-bound thoughts... "

"Yet if only those alive, sentient, at the moment of murder were fed into the mill of knives, and only parts of those bodies utilised, many must have perished in the peripheral processes you speak of... and where did the cast-offs lie?"

"Nothing left that chamber, ever... many; that remaining, superfluous puree, was made use of... in a diversity of ways... lubricating the machines, or in adornments appropriate to our progress... bones worked into the filigree of the engines, into lattices on walls or ceiling... tissues sewn into the garb of laborours, leathery with foreign heats... dramas in the manner of Ruysch... what wastage remained we burned down right there, within the chamber, near enough to the thing that the smokes wreathed around his quiet mask, with the powerful focus of the most violent stripe of light... the light which eats.. the colour the sun would chew us with were it not for the ape-manifested cloak of crackling air..."

"Yet you alone controlled them so utterly? Powers were imparted to you?"

"No guards need be... their shape was curved into the funnel, feeding toward that mask... it was the others, too, the sensitives that were there... who had to sketch or scribble steadily during the process... afterwards among their choked or frenzied words and scrawls we could find insights, messages of great value... nothing was left undone, unworked... inspirations multiplied with such reinforcements... and that vast fabric, embracing worlds and rulers of worlds, came into shape, visibly..."

"Those words and portents didn't come out very accurately, as I recall."

"You think you know of them, the real ones? ... Fool... you can't see the accomplishment ... do I not still live? With the rest so utterly consumed no man has found a thread of them? Is *it* not waiting yet? That long passage under sea and earth... and hounds of human vengeance sniffing even the moon's galleries for us... the things I speak of were the evidence, the definition... three times forward, twice retreat... in the world's appearances.... ... the third time... while it waits I live!"

"Your sensitives were consumed in the rubble?"

"Those apes... squatting there and scribbling... performing the mutilations and perversions their ostensors guided them to... they understood nothing... even after the dark, fierce colours fell like shadows on the whole array, and hands went on scribbling... they did not feel the charge --- the *presence* which no one else could ignore... and words were being written through their vapid hands which were full of power, marked out the path... even when the visible spectrum had passed by there would be a growing glow... around the thing which fed. Around the remnants, too, sometimes, and even the broth being compounded would begin to glow as it reached the proper point... would swell and pulse... we remembered it as yellow light, but it was much more, much else... compounded like the sun of all colours visible and invisible... and pulsed out of the very flesh itself... even the flesh of those nearby... even those whose efforts did not fail through what was to them a sealing of the eyes, even they might phosphoresce ... all the flesh ablaze; those who laboured shone like praxitelean stars, face transformed to furnace, heart to coal... key pieces glowed out more brightly as each body smoked to silence... at such times we would later find the most successful revelations scattered through our scribes' babel... but if... if a body, one of those most deeply committed... sometimes even one of our own... would begin suddenly to smoulder, smoke, burst into genuine flame... there would be such a flood of power as if beyond telling, a transformation out of the worlds... the star-hearth burned inside that chamber... sear away the flesh of those who cringed there, make fulgurites of our implements... but *I* --- burned as hot or hotter and was not consumed! --- and those others --- the flesh once ignited would smoke instantly to a cinder which sank through the solid stone of the floor, left a spatter of perforations reaching, perhaps, to the core of the earth, steam and crackling coming up those needle-thin straws... "

"And when that putative fire passed away from the body?"

"Then I knew."

"Knew what?"

"The roots of all knowing... the whole grasp between power and curve... the smiting of moons and suns..."

"--- and the futility of your living hell?"

In the unanswering face was no defeat except that of having bared its secrets, for the first time, to a genuine soul, and that unwillingly. "So you passed your nights," David said, "presiding over this hive of shivering, emaciated bodies, marched in to be flayed and dismembered, within an orchestration of shrieks, dazed men consumed by the silent fires of cryptochromes plastering the walls with red flesh and offal... some scribbled and some plucked chins, planning outrages to come, still more hideous... every night..."

"And in the midst of this crowd --- a byzantine complex of ornaments and sufferings, a tabernacle of bones and wails --- and endless drone --- even to the last hours of wreckage --- you presided... and never once dared that tiny mask..."

"The third time," the sound rattled from the thick lips almost like a laugh.

"The third indeed. You broke bones and spilled blood once before, Herr von Uexkull, but here I speak and from here I go. If your other victims were to march before you again, would you then credit the face you saw, the power you felt you were given? The third time will be a wave-front across the universe, for all of us. Can you this moment shape or mould bodies or destinies to your desire?

"There is a blue glow of decomposition around you --- the only one of all those colours you seem to have retained. In a few weeks you will greet your assassins with the same luminosity... and the same indifference? That tooth-shaped cyanide capsule was, I take it, long ago dropped on a casual dump. And if those revelations, the assuredness of that promised victory, were communicated in words which do not translate into human language, they may well fail to translate into human being..."

"The red star still shines," the voice rattled back, independent of the sunken body. "There is still a spasm of horror through the earth."

"As you speak some vast star dies --- some tranquil mind works through to the ineffable realm of peace."

But he needed a few more hints, and got them. He felt emptied rather than repelled, but was perspiring heavily; the night was cool but without breeze. The barrier he had maintained against the horrors he had virtually experienced was time-bounded, and he had to be away before it broke. He rose and pocketed the quiet fossil, and at once the body slumped forward across the table. No one else was visible; the lights had been lowered.

He walked off, not looking back; passed out of the silent terrace and into the star-soaked night. There seemed no refuge from those iridescent needle-points anywhere, no alternative but attack. He faced them meditatively, without expression. They too looked back uncommunicative.

III

"Senor? Permit me --- my name is Jacinto Zel. Perhaps we could walk over into the shade? Ah... You see you speak a little too boldly, senor; people here have good reason not to answer you, even to avoid you at mention of the estate. Once it was harmless enough; it is a large estate and was well known here; in fact most of us older men worked there in its prime. These days it is fenced off and no one is permitted to enter, so, you see, they could not answer you even if they would. No visitors are permitted, unless you know the hacendadero, and no one here knows him, and people... are afraid. You do not know these things?"

David shook his head warily. The man before him was tall for a Maya, gaunt, neither young nor age-pinched, his face no more avaricious than that of anyone whose livelihood is not taken for granted.

"Ah... you see, a rich German owned it before the last German war. He aimed to become richer, and decided to make himself the King of the Nutmegs... had us work for months, planting thousands of trees, trees from Grenada and even Asia. Beautiful young nutmegs; we tended them for years, brought them to a healthy adulthood. Then, alas! --- no one had told him that nutmegs are made in the image of man; they are either male or female, the male trees, of course, bearing no fruit. And nowhere in all his vast groves stood a female tree!

"So it was this bankruptcy rather than the war which cost him his estate, even though Germans' property was, during the war, taken. There was a claim of sorts still, but no one cared and we worked our milpas there, saving many of the nutmeg trees, as honourable men would do, until long after the war was over. A German then came and took it again. It is said he did so honestly, buying it from the government with family money, he-trees and all. But we did not know. He fenced it in at once, with our crops in the mid-season of their growth, and forbade us to go in. Yes. When our men cut the fence and went to find their milpas, to harvest their crops, they did not return. It was like the old days again --- still is --- and we can do nothing, so we do nothing, only try to live to greet the next dawn. My milpas were all in there; a good part of it is the best land in this part of the forest.

"But--- aside from the fact that times are very rough for me, and you know this, of course, being Indio, as I can see --- though from very far off --- all the way up in Yucatán? or the mountains further south? --- but you have city clothes and ways and means then that the others do not, so perhaps if you either want to see this man or something of his land, I may be able to help you somewhat. You see, several years ago a party of scientists from the United States asked permission to enter his land to examine a great cave which everyone here knows of (though no one enters), which is full of blind fish and other marvels and which I have heard goes straight to the bowels of the earth, leads to our ancient hell, Zibalba, you know of course, and they were quite able to get permission to enter for some time as they did not disturb the owner, and spent some weeks at the mouth of that terrible grotto.

"And my neighbor, Jesús Ac, whose milpas were beside mine in the property now forbidden, was hired by these men to work and carry for them --- they took only one or two of us, you know, as is their custom, --- I regretted, then, that I was not one, for they fed him abundantly and paid him well --- but the other one, a younger man, died somehow in the cave, and my friend Jesús worked with them only in camp, did not go into the cave. No. While they were down there pinching the tails of devils he circled around the property and was able to see what changes had been made, how the land lay. In fact it was not being worked at all, and was growing over with weeds --- our cornfields rank while our children hungered. He escaped the guards, at the time." A long hesitation. "Shortly after the foreigners went away and he returned to the village, he died. In fact, he only lived long enough to give me a rough idea of the new pathways, enabling me to move in by a secret spot he had scouted out, very difficult to reach.

"This is of course in strict confidence, señor. You know us people, we are poor, we share our misfortunes and our good fortunes, but this thing, señor, I have told not even my wife, no one at all --- that I have been inside the fence, around that land, and that I can get you there, guide you through, and perhaps --- though I tell you truthfully I have not yet done it myself --- get you to the house ---"

"Without being killed?"

"Señor! You think I would take money from you only to walk to my own death and yours?" The fervent face was not visibly dissembling, just very thin. There was no reek of alcohol, no sign of dissipation, except that emptiness of the belly which is the hunger of a willing, even an honourable man. His expression, in certain hesitations in his speech, revealed the magnitude of the risk he felt himself to be taking.

"There is someone in that house I must see; but I must get to him altogether unannounced. Once I reach the house I will be able to handle it myself --- but anything as simple as an armed guard --- "

"Armed guard!" the faint Maya humour. "That is the easy part. We are old hands at getting past those."

"Though you say only you and your particular friend have returned alive?"

"Yes, but not on account of bullets --- "

"Is the fence electrified? Are there mines? Dogs? Shotgun trips?" Zel doubted all of this. Fears had been cultivated much too cheaply. He himself had been by the fence the night the second party had disappeared; there had been no sounds, no screams, shots.

"So what then?"

"... You are an educated man, senor?"

"As some men would say."

"Is it true that an educated man has no fear of devils?"

"No, it's not."

"Ah... that is unfortunate."

"Fear or not, it is not to say that I might not be able to counter a devil or two --- perhaps with some advice --- "

"And a walk through hell? Would you account that a minor thing?"

"You mean there are no fears for the body at all?"

"Not utterly, but the body's fears are the little ones. You understand. Now, I have been inside the property at night, have circled around it, have seen and felt strange things, and lived. Partly it is because I went only to look, no doubt, with no untoward intends, and partly because I kept very much in the bush, where no one notices or cares. I know, from the old days, where the manor house is, but I have avoided it recently. Then, too, perhaps they are less vigilant now --- it is, oh, years since anyone has been killed there. But the Germans are still there, and of an evening you can sometimes glimpse lights from the house, from a high tree, and at times one of their cars passes on the road. But no one goes near. We have learned hard, and we have learned. I do not boast, but I am as good a woodsman as any of my people, and I can find my way through a column of army ants, or step over the nose of a rooting tapir without alarming him. In turn, the world frightens me little, day or night. But in your own case --- if you are not familiar with these forests, it is perhaps better to wait until daylight ---"

"It won't be any safer, for me nor you. If I go I want to go at once, tonight. I can manage the jungle. You can find the way without a torch?"

"I not only can, but must... If you carry a torch a strange shape will mock you from its flame, once you are on the land."

"Or from the earth or air; but if you know the path, I think I can find a way." In Spanish the sentence was equivocal, and Jacinto dismissed it. He found it difficult to understand both speech and wish of this unexpressive fellow-indigene, but had seen enough of outlanders already to realise the superfluity of most language and to read from expression and a few key words the basic intents; the qualifications came to him through facial twitches --- except for this man.

But there was in him so instant an appreciation of such totally unprecedented things that it gave him enough resolve to put his trust in the employ of his client. If some damage to one of the mysterious tyrants inside the fence were to result, it might be regrettable, but many lives remained to balance the score. And his people could always, as they did every time of trouble, melt into the bush, where no enemy had ever found or extracted them.

"You will take a gun, señor?"

"I don't have one, but I don't think one would be of any use."

"Ah... my thought." He suggested a sum and David gave him half in a roll of quetzales, agreeing that the remainder would follow on their return. Once they had agreed Jacinto seemed to find small reasons for delay, wanting first to take the money home to his wife, but David insisted on setting out at once; he had not really intended to begin the same evening, but had learned to respect the apparent flow of chance --- which had carried him face to face with Von Uexkull on a day hissing with omens --- and believed it best to move as it drew him. His alien presence in this small village would quickly be remarked and reported. And the usual rumours of the bush might be electrically sped from some dark hut here.

He motioned Jacinto to amble on. The afternoon was waning, but still very hot, and few people were around; bare-breasted women peered through doorways without any special curiosity. At first Jacinto followed well-travelled paths, then glancing around hacked his way quickly uphill and signalled David to pull lianas back into place behind him. From there on they were in such deep shadow that twilight made little difference, Jacinto navigating the dense underbrush without using his noisy machete more than necessary. Certainly he knew the way, swinging his blade in advance of the worst of the fallen growth; it was a trail of sorts, but deserted, all irregularities cushioned by many layers of decay. The canopy at last closed over them and they walked out in near darkness, a park-like openness.

Night was announced more by coolness and the hum of mosquitoes than by flagging light, or the sounds which suddenly sprang up and ringed them, bubbling from bloated throats, stridulant sawing legs, and the soft-scaled syringes of glowing-eyed birds --- the birds on the ground and the toads in the trees. There was no breeze to slake their sweaty skins, but at times a little puff of air was tossed at them by a passing bat. They crossed a few wan clearings and saw the stars warming up, saw that there would be a faint octave of a moon.

Though David had never in his recollected life entered a jungle, he felt no fear. The absent light guerdoned his eyes from the more disturbing images --- however innocuous they were on contact; his field experience had taught him that the most venomous reptiles flee census, and the worst of insects are not very virulent.

Since there was no sense of change in their surroundings or in the cacophony which moved with them, they either travelled or did not trade illusions for a long time. Despite the monotonous greyness images came at intervals to his mind, almost to his eyes, to suggest he was reaching a less tolerant environment, had swum from comfortable darkness into choppy shoals.

They came to a fence, which David found by touch to be a conventional one, a single strand of barbed wire across the top, now broken down --- though it had been massive once --- under the weight of dead creepers and lianas. By Jacinto's account they should have now rounded the bulk of the estate and be approaching it from the uninhabited rear --- and nearly opposite the point where the invading parties had entered years ago; the geometric pole of safety.

Jacinto's breach was well concealed, and the ground adjacent being neither used nor tended. Still, both hesitated. David was not beyond imagining a dark form hurtling down on him, or a cycad of fire bursting tellingly from the earth, if he leapt the fence; the intensity of both images was surprising. Jacinto also stood as if his nerve were failing, though his face was immobile.

"Listen."

David heard only the same beaded croaking, sawing, and cooing; it had not lost any volume, which David, judging the world already by his own expectations, found alarming. He sensed that Jacinto, however, heard or suspected something more.

"These --- these things, these ghosts of mind, they are not real, you understand? Deception--- dream food --- it is only when you fear them that you are in danger --- "

Jacinto, smoking by way of excuse for a pause, answered mildly, "Dreams should die, señor, not the dreamers," and vaulted the fence easily and without accident. David followed at once.

"Now we're on the bad ground, señor. Follow me quite closely, as quietly as you can. If anything strange happens, remain perfectly silent, motionless. I have done this and I survive. If my ideas fail we will try yours."

Strange things began to happen almost at once; motionlessness would have got them nowhere that night, so David agreed only to silence; but Jacinto was unnerved so quickly that David had to move forward into the lead. They conferred in whispers so low that their lips touched ears, and Jacinto indicated a general direction by a touch to David's shoulder or arm, while nervously keeping a rear survey.

The growth on the earth was not overly thick, but there was much hissing and crackling in the process of working through it, and the thyme-like odours of crushed stems and leaves became heavy as myrrh around them. Soon enough a powdery bitterness was flushed up from the ground as they passed, and curious sounds, a micro-opera, occurred with patterns he might otherwise have ascribed to snakes, except that these seemed meaningful, darting momentarily toward him, diverting away, and back, as if intended to be menacing, discouraging, but not substantial; things flew through the leaves overhead with more visibility, but less noise, than anything met in the forest. Despite the size of these passers-by neither man felt the comforting pat of flushed air.

Sigils of fungi glowed on tree boles with disturbing legibility, but the worst single distraction was the conviction that a man-sized shadow was only a short distance away --- and it was too dark for a shadow to fall anywhere, except against an unseen light. Shadows, because there was no suspicion of breath, of heartbeat, unless those anomalous, disfigured sounds which kept harassing them would somehow resolve to such. Shadows, in fact, seemed to hang like cobwebs in the empty air; suddenly these came swooping down on them from all directions, baring phosphorescent combs of tusks tangled with glow-worms of drivel, belching sulphur heat into their faces. Instinctively David threw up his arms and saw Jacinto fall to the ground, his white clothes almost obscured by their clustering; but David realised almost at once that despite their flocking he felt nothing, and their teeth seemed not actually to impinge upon his skin. He lowered his arms and forced himself to calmness, and they were no longer there.

When he touched Jacinto, who shivered on the ground, the Maya gave a yelp and rolled over several times, and then writhed out and back with a long moan. "It's nothing --- nothing," David whispered loudly; Jacinto struggled up to his hand and answered, "It's more than anything yet," lifting an arm from which blood dripped. Two concentric rectangles, tails fleeing into virgin flesh, with an unquiet figure zigzagging through them, had been cut deeply into the flat skin, the thin flesh.

"That wasn't from the bats, Jacinto."

"No --- it came as I rolled --- some tooth or claw in the earth itself." He had fallen suddenly into disturbingly total calm.

"Bind it with my handkerchief."

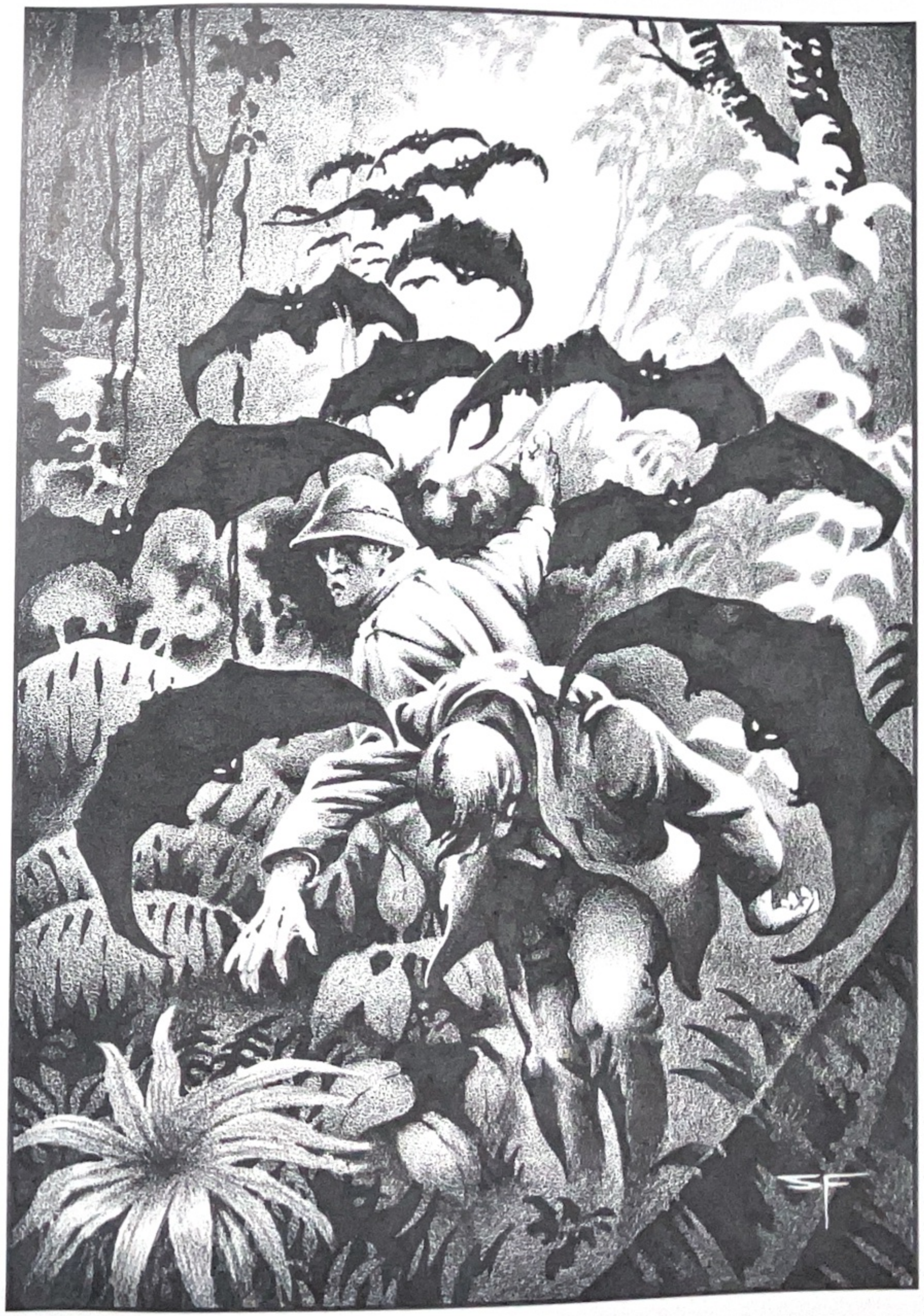
"Let it bleed."

They went on into trees shouldering more thickly and murmuring ahead of them. David felt sure now there was another person somewhere near --- some subtle leak of life-sign grazed him. But there was a whole series of presences in earth and air which he would not have minded had he not worried about the impact of that single presence, bringing on a concerted attack. An elusive harmonic to the jungle noises came very low, from beneath them, like a subterranean echo, a night-mutter from wet abyssal caverns. It gave him an unexpected vertigo, the conviction that the scale of soil beneath him was thinning dangerously, and he began tapping ahead with each toe for covered pits.

There was a gross movement away from a questioning toe-prod, and a knee-high hummock twisted itself to meet him; he leapt back against Jacinto's unmoving body.

Peering into the dimness he thought for a moment he had touched the emerging head of a buried man. There was some sign of eyes, or eye-sockets, and perhaps the raw sketch of a mouth; but he was a huge earth hummock, true enough, and the dust fell away from cheeks and chin as it stirred again, slightly, impotent. Straightening, he found at his elbow a distinct full face of wood on the massive burl of a ceiba tree. Its eyes were more fully formed, but with no glint in them, and a set of lips which pursed and relaxed with infinite slowness. However he willed them away, both remained objectively real, the wooden face twitching, the earthen head shifting again.

He thought of the weird eyes some butterflies in these jungles throw up with their wings, blind and illusory. Stepping over the head he continued, without a word of protest from Jacinto, feeling his way with foot and hand. There was another shift directly below him, but he was less quick to avoid it then. Clouds of sparks in the air took whorled shapes



and spun into recognisable patterns. At first he thought they were fireflies, but they were unblinking and steady --- though whole clouds might suddenly disappear, to reappear in a hulking shape moving across the ground with mock legs, something known to his integral fears, his hereditary cautions. He stood his ground, and they passed over him, enveloping him in component sparks, and went their way. It was all insane, irrelevant sentience; there was no strength in the fingers or tentacles which came from the wind, which could not tighten on him; no force in the grotesquely swollen bodies which wheeled in front of him, made of wood, leaves, or mud; and the contempt or indifference he was generating was a powerful counter to them. In a few more steps they were nothing but the quick sketches of imagination every man makes in half-light and shadow.

He felt he had made one victory over panic, and when the moonlight spared him a share again, he paused long enough to wipe his forehead. Stuffing his handkerchief, which had been several minutes in his hand, back into his shirt pocket he noticed the clean linen streaked with black. Leaning forward into the open cusp of sky he saw that light pronounced those dark stains blood. He ran a forefinger along his throat and held it into the clarity; it too was ebony, though he knew there was no real wound, no mortal incision anywhere, before he felt over his throat and forehead carefully.

He spat on his hand and saw the same black plaster trickle away. It was asking him to believe that water sluiced his heart and thews.

"Jacinto!" There had been no sound from the bush, but the gaunt figure stepped out by the massive ceiba tree where David was standing, at once.

"Let me see that wound again." But the black-limned tattoo which had formed emitted no blood, but gleamed out gold, a visible stamp of brilliant metal, in the darkness. David backed off a step and found himself flat against the tree. He saw Jacinto's whole body now, stiff and upright, as a charred stake, a cinder of flesh and soul, the single flame of that scar beaming out at him. The eyes glowed white as embers, but interior to his wound; the dying snarl of transfiguration had reduced the rest to ashes. The slight pulse just under the blackened surface was only the settling of consumed charcoal.

"Señor?" The baked mouth hissed. "The water turns to blood? Then the gold will pitch into the deep!"

Dry-mouthed, David tried to mumble, "Control yourself --- it's illusion ---sueno!---" but the charred form, statuesque, was no more convinced than he. He could not force himself to touch it.

"Senor? Your flesh is burning from you?" There was pain in his seared mouth this time.

A hiss which might have begun the third query dribbled from his lips, but never made the long human release of the vowel. That face flexed wide suddenly --- mouth as cavernous as eyes --- and the tongue spurted out wildly, fully: with a convulsive clamp of the jaws he bit it off and it fell, writhing toward the ground --- and David was knocked aside as a body hurtled to him, broke against him, and with a long dagger transfixed the lump of flesh the moment it touched the earth. His head jarred upward, David saw that the moment steel entered that separated tongue there was a burst of yellow corposants from the crown of Jacinto's head; a rather more human look came into his eyes then, but their light dissolved at once, and the tetanied body remained upright.

The other man --- a man in ordinary, but not peasant, clothes --- lifted the blade, where the detached organ struggled; and David bent to look --- at a strawberried lump which swivelled shreds like arms and legs, waved pale pimples of eyes like blown embers under midnight; a lace of silver slaver pinned along a hideously broad mouth waggled with urgent words, but there was no sound, only the evident contempt for revelation, the uncontrollable urge to leap at gnawable throats. Yet over the snail-eyes and the raw hump they warded tiny circlets rose and faded in slow succession, like smoke rings, but of the tiniest if mightiest of sparks, shedding no illumination on their black source. Only two were visible before the outermost would dissipate and a fresh one rise mistily from the brow.

Despite its impalement and the amphibian analogy there was no doubting its ability to work, to curse. David equivocated between its hideous face and the shadowed one that matched his absorption.

"Crowned with many crowns?" the other one said in a voice of several depths, different ages. Then looking up, "What passport enables you to move so freely and fearlessly through his kingdom?"

The question was open and honest, but David's necessary suspicion held his tongue until the other one backed out into full moonlight, the creature still twisting in his hand. "Just getting this far, for me, is hours and battles, and even then I'm not sure I don't owe it to you. Yet you're immune!"

"We've had our hindrances."

There was a faint amusement on the face of the other, but all the necessary comprehension.

"Yet I mean you --- you don't need the lore, the safekeeps, I've had to pick up; I'm afraid you may even tell me you came upon this place by happenstance."

"If the word means anything."

"Yes; yes, I can see... and I've been searching for years... Well, an independent course is the proud kick of fate."

"What are you after?"

"What you are, I suspect." David, primed to consider his own purpose the usual one --- to advance into horror for the purpose of learning again that horror was his own creation, that he conquered it by anatomising it, defused its parasitic strength by joining its object with the other commonplaces of the earth, realised suddenly that he no more knew his purpose than a chessman.

"Then you must know some certain means of jousting it. I can't say as much."

"Together, I suspect we may make a dent of sorts."

"Isn't there something we can do for Jacinto?"

"Afraid it's a bit late."

"What would have happened if --- if you hadn't been in time?"

"Don't ask now; don't yield to these impulsive thoughts. Arm yourself."

"With what?"

"The only thing that works: the lotus-bud: nothingness. An utter, committed total-nothing: no fear, hatred, hope, horror, curiosity --- none of these dispensable toys you have been experimenting with ... make-believe preparations for a make-believe end... changes fuel time, feed the devil itself. Don't get dizzy when you are pitched into the abyss, or relieved when things seem to soften... "

"Is that how to handle the horrors we meet?"

"Less than that, for you. If you have any problems, just close your eyes; if you can still see them --- and a blind man could see them --- you know your body is safe. At the worst hoist yourself off the ground, just a few inches, for a few minutes."

"And you? You're risking your life?"

"And a few corollaries, yes." His face changed uninformatively.

"It hardly seems it could be this easy --- a contest with a skewered tongue!"

"It isn't. *This* is before the beginning. If you consider that we can only battle on a field common to us all you might ask if the odds aren't increasing. The tongue is the organ that --- with minimal help from its surrounding spaces --- transmutes words from psychergy to space-time --- those evanescent sounds in which so many permanences are bounded --- the only abstractions in our continuum which are active, causative, vulnerable --- time-defying, space-transcending solidities --- they can summon enormous energy in an instant, carry in a few quanta power enough to sway tides of men and beasts, reconstruct mountains, blot the face of the sun --- with or without the interpolation of mechanism --- the ultimate power-organ, in its season, well beyond the inconveniences of shed flesh..."

"Yet the tongue is eunuch without a brain. And a brain has many effectors to bring into play. Do we get those too?"

"Only too soon."

"I'll have to follow you, then. I don't know how I will recognise one ---"

"Nor I. It could be a sound, beneficial, compassionate human life --- as we see it --- going its course, open and innocent in those acts which will ultimately rain upon us. A blind beggar crooning all his days. Any one of those faces that we came through. A tree toad. A leaf --- a column of ants --- an eruption of lava --- Jacinto Zel --- "

"Or you."

"Or me --- or nothing at all. We go like eagles through the dark if we ride in the midst of a thousand torches. Eyes, just pinholes, are made for creatures which can only use tidbits of things --- not whole things. And we can only match our assailant if we can become a whole thing."

"I can't understand enough to be encouraged."

"The best way, probably; you're the safest of us both right now, you see that? -- enough that your nearness will shelter me to some extent. We should move. We've got to make it before dawn --- this star-sleet has more than one effect --- and time has been so worm-like since I started I don't even know how much we've got left."

"Your name, sir?"

"Call me John --- or anything," he answered, "though who I am is an old rabbi in Safed, Pal --- Israel --- at least his eyes, ears, arms, and legs --- the body that moves and acts for him --- and his name is Elijah. It's an old association; it's my life. I'm carrying some of the weaponry he forged, but for the initial skirmish I rely on the same defence I gave you."

David knew how large a thing John admonished him to; it was not merely an attitude or a cerebral garment to be put on, but an ultimate exertion to restrain brain and body to the primal, almost inaccessible state of pure being --- not passive but super-passive, super-active--- without response to afflictions of whatever consequence as they came. Diligently he attempted to restrain thought, to place himself inside all thoughts. Had he years of preparation, he could have done so, but in this state, he would have doubted --- if he allowed himself to doubt.

As they moved off again John swung over one shoulder the strap from which a heavy box was slung. He fell into David's trail, and David was able at once to test one of his points: he came upon a stump which opened a triply telescoped eye, through three rows of spike-long fangs, which wobbled threateningly in the glow of several pads of phosphorescence perched above it in the branches.

Obediently he shut his eyes and found he could see the abnormal aspects of it quavering and flickering vaguely on his retina, something clearly beyond the dim spray of normal light. It was a corpse-glow unindebted to flesh, uninterested in the focus of his eyes. However energetic the head or form remained when he opened them again, however near him with heat of breath or chill of hunger, it had lost most of its terror. Repeating the experiment as images bored down from wood, earth, or air, when threatening constellations spelled out leeches probing for him or skulls opening for him, he found each transitory; his fear dribbled away to nothing, and he voided the thrill of victory to match.

He had no time to measure the degree of acceptance, or psychic inanimation, which he had achieved, because the onset of greater horror was instantaneous, too multiple to be dealt with by sections.

The first shock was of realising that there were three bodies in his sphere of concern instead of two--- oddly, once Jacinto had spelled out his tongue and John had come forward to make himself known, confirm that elusive impression, he had again been aware of only two --- and then that one of these was far more intimately involved with him than it should have been. There was a squirming, sidling body snapping at his jugulars, clamping his carotids --- not from the sun-side of his skin but from within, making free with the passageways in his bone-marrow and his abdomen, moving through him as through a catacomb, fumbling around his heart, nuzzling the soft plications in his head, choking with inthrust thumbs the apertures of his lungs; it had taken a murderous sovereignty over his entrails. He could not define its shape --- it reached out not with claws or arms but with setae of thoughts and shudders, sending up a whole froth of black commerce in fat sticky tongues to envenom all active organs in David's expanded body. In the bare second that he allowed this panic to jerk him David was nearly eaten from within by this gleeful newcomer; but he subdued all tremours and sank slowly to calmness, aware of the vast bulk within him, capable of expansion --- a seed planted in his awareness by the outthrust glow of verminous eyes on that crown-blazing monster which was being carried lanced behind him, as in a procession.

Simultaneously, he was aware of himself in an identical position, a simple gelatinous eft inside a vast, evolving volume spattered over with fluctuating torches, whose vital members he wished to seek out and seize, to throttle and gnaw, if only he could determine which were in his grasp. Several of the palpitant geometries on his plane seemed delicate or vulnerable; but as he moved, in mind, there was within him a tactile hiss against his mesenteries, and he stilled his will. If he moved with violence against the kraken which engulfed him, a twin violence would rummage within himself.

In the face of that influx of suggestions, images, he tried to withdraw to a familar crouch of mind, ward off the conviction that somehow he must fight, that somewhere lay a course of action which would save him, but quickly discovered that the state of inaction he aimed for was no refuge. Attack came to him at once through all sensory channels: laser-worms bored through his skin, mordant rays of annihilation prismed in his muscles; every memory and concept his brain had shaped or housed was twisted, perverted, putrefied, paraded before what he was forced to cede to his visual theatre in its most mocking --- or dumbfounding --- form. The nausea and dizziness which descended at once were easily shrugged off, but only with the most rigid concentration could he secure himself against the damage these invading entities wreaked on the inmost resources of his mind.

He would grant that he existed simultaneously in thirty-six different infinities if he could put from his mind the scientific sophistries which would have linked these to other concepts, all damaging to him now. In one of these his skin bounded a chavin-invaginated immensity where a black lurker waited; in another, a lesser body of his own kept watch within a similar cage. In still another his body moved swiftly, lithely, through a spark-stippled gloom of forest, drawn or propelled to the strangest interview in the history of its species. But this one no longer had paramount claim on his commitment to reality; however much this temporal structure might be tampered with by all the sensations the vectors of incredible spaces would wield, there was that link with a world he found familiar, but he already realised that there was danger in the comfort he might have taken from that.

"It won't be a battle," John had somewhere said, "because there is no real victory; it is just a temporary settlement between the thing and ourselves... "

But *the thing* was no reality, but a suspicion masquerading as a reality. He could not, answering, seek the lowest plane of being --- the ignorance which does not know its ignorance --- but had in fact to penetrate one by one the fabrics which all the accessible infinities wore to him; there was, not an end, but a latitude of balance, to be located. Without it, there was infinite horror.

He steeled his mind against every fear he could prophesy and sent it turning through each of the universes which was open to him, contained him, or was contained in him. Each yawned to his first awakening like a bottomless void; and his movement, or the urge of his consciousness, into each was a precipitous fall from depth to greater depth, an infinite vortex. Then blue meanderings, green mists, or brown punctuations would collect with some totally outrageous threat which had to be dealt with; there would be a silencing, a renewed outreach, a new descent. An eternal succession of descents --- never any rising, though he moved only in the dimension of space from one aspect of a fixed mass to another, as among the facets of a crystal; no sustenance for time leaked from the hard immovable elements he found --- carried him through every protective involution of being, into contours and expressions he could not acknowledge, through whole carnivals of metamorphosis to which he could have put grotesque or disgusting names had he not cancelled names and recognitions altogether.

There were rainbows everywhere, but only rarely in the hues his physical eye had learned; cell-wringing, skin-etching, monster-vending, brimstone-whirling cryptochromes came to him necessarily in ape-eyed terms, but he had to accept them here in their independence. Something in him picked them up, committed them to his brain's archives, but he ignored the associations, dismissed the impulse. Sensations of a thousand fleshes between his teeth, of salts and nectars on his tongue and nostrils, also sloughed off at once, with their continual, grosser replacements. Cancerous offshoots rose from his tissues and took up a life of their own, hanging to him like remoras and increasing his mass suicidally in any given space, until he learned to cauterise them from his thoughts. Unholy marriages were consummated in quick instants before he could quell the impulse to lust, and freakish progeny bloated everywhere before renounced as illusion. Gravity-storms roiled around him, seeking to weld him into whichever of the universes he had entered at the moment with collapsar weight; every means of jessing him was brought into play --- realisations of his thoughts and pleasures into great theatres of forms, his achievements and ambitions lived

out into worlds and histories; creatures spouted, seethed, fissioned to do his will, had he released it; the short sharp pulses of adjustment to the suns, the stirring of magma beneath the crusts, was twisted to his interpreting. Yet it would as quickly serve the wills that bloomed from crystals, from incandescent gases, from the curdling virus of undulating plagues. His body-matter became a fiery cirrostratus, rocketing in all directions, coagulated into plasma pinwheels, while his own heart-power rotated, burst, reassembled. He knew himself the only diamond in a total chaos, and the ultimate in chaos without a diamond.

In the cold, eventless darkness he knew he must eventually find, he was able to pause and reassemble the various lines of his self-consciousness, to recognise each of the universes he had tasted as just one more hypophrygian chord, the phases of fire, fluidity, and vacancy at root one and nothing. There were paths and patterns to coherence and empery in each, but they led only to further convulsions, recombinings. As all were froth on the nodes of time, David came slowly, irresistibly, to the conclusion that either all were masks, or none were; that the thing itself could battle him by any means he chose, in any tapestry he broke into.

By his withdrawal he could save himself at any instant, but he could not save his future. This is what John had meant by a settlement... it was counter to his philosophy; but so, he discovered, were the universes.

David was acutely aware that he stood a great distance from the supreme understanding, the utmost serenity, by which a matured soul would have resolved himself at once free of the continuum whose body paced the vivified jungles, of the world-shell quiescent to the ravening of an indwelling cosmicide, the eft watchful for a clear distraction to grasp some cardinal vessels, the crystal mountain with its poems and sorrows glittering over its coarse surface in tourmaline and onyx, the emperor of dreams marionetting garnet-spectrate suns. With a smile of attainment mitigating his stiffening lips, *they* would have shrugged off those twitches of place and time; *he* had the choice only between remaining cloistered in a statis with the knowledge of his helplessness, or of participating in being again, being machined back into the prison-castles tossed from horn to horn of the outreaching and infolding ylem, following through the permutations of a matter in which he might recognise his adversary when met.

He knew better than to attempt to plunge into the primal ylem itself, to graft his cloud of unknowing on that roaring unity where all creations and destructions, all profiles and limbos, were fused into one annulling brew, into impulses not yet severed into spheres able to portion him out among a billion alien destinies... to smother every element that was his with igniting antonyms. Nor could he join its incandescent plasma in the leap which blossomed on the black chill of space, since so much of it cohered into formulas differing from the furnace-fountain only by degree, and were alike riddled with irresistible, rheum-capped torrents of aims and edicts, time's most faithful spaniels.

Similarly he had to sift the whole ophir of worlds through a disinterested gaze, discount the siren-lure of their half-eternal, mineral, crystal-infinite stabilities. Ruptured planets fired cannonades of meteorites which wove through wide twilights to raise orchards of lilac spurts when they pierced clouds of potassium, branding sister spheres below with nuptial rings of lava, or struck badlands of mountain-massive crystals in bronze and greys that burst up in triboluminescent glow to their remorseless impact. Shuddering lands horned with vast cordilleras fluoresced in peacock-opals under the obscure beams of moons determined only as shields of blackness hung on star-frothing skies, lingering faintly as the glow of death into the gulf of black-purple dawns. Monadnocks of single emeralds or topaz cast fletched shadows over vast agate steppes; bays of tinkling rose petals ground up in gravel-tide to the usurpation of plumbous moons; calderas of boiling bromine, flamingo fumaroles; garnet-sharded beaches, synclines of jade by turtling continents black-rooted as moly.

A whole hemisphere of glimmering tempest was pillared by luminous waterspouts, pocked with a fractured obsidian of whirlpools. Archipelagoes of malmsey-coloured foam smothered pinnacles of basalt or malachite with their evanescent islands, breeding into the air whirling rafts of bubbles which made a dim sun father to diminutive prism-worlds. Oceans of mordant alcohols licked out gelatinous meteorites from their beds in osmium cliffs, raised clouds of fragrance and offence over headlands chrismed with sugary spray, spread eskers of sweet savour across piedmonts of beryls. Long glutinous ropes rolled to and fro across such plains by furious winds too stuck and held at wide intervals, making of a byzantine torte nets for a whole glow of mind and plan.

Stupendous bows of lightning arched from world to world, fused and vitrified cratones of quartz, opening vast lenses over half the surface to reveal and magnify the mango-pied insistencies of roiling magmas, while clouds of green and lemon poisons oozed in to etch the glazed continents into rococo bomarzos. Molten iron spilled over nascent deserts was blown by geysers into bubbles which floated off to reverberate against armoured alps like Zamzum bells, clanging carillons echoing from canyon to canyon of the same crust thinly hardened, rattling to the driving of hail or ringing to the cymbal-clash of aerolites, chattering harmonics underlightning and its musical tassels in the breath.

Ranges of tornade-polished marble took on mantles of scintillant green snows, and volcanoes turned foetid blue cores or almond-scented thunderheads to scan questing comets; ultramarine inks of glaciation bloated over jagged shields as milky nebulae closed in above their whistling jetstreams and softened a millenial night.

These many worlds, the ticks and efts of manic stars, seethed briefly through tremendous cycles of lands and lives in tune to momentary displacements of the flux of fire and ammoniacal ice, minute twists of star-stuff into knots of intent, whose random fading left the shattering spheres forgotten, contorted with earthquakes... the wrongness of all the worlds was in the aleation of these stars, the law which mocked destinies...

The massive pull of these stellar ingenies then posed his greatest hazard as he tested with his modes of thought the wisps of coolness about to crystallise and coagulate into acceptances and faculties cast among winds and waters, able to drink dancing beams from the stagelit heavens and contort them in quizzical configurations among the many windows within themselves, and became born from them a black eidolon twin to his own in size, shape, potency, and silence, returning rainbow responses to the gouging surgery of time.

As he settled his awareness into this new incarnation he was conscious, too vaguely to conceptualise, of some gentle current which issued from within him much like the placid air-bulb of a glassbower's pipe, tending him into a shape most effective, most congruent with his surroundings and intentions, as if it rose to meet the walls of a predestined mould. It was not something he contained in any of the crystalline aggregates he used to balance the forces, which made him yet, unwhistled, it was always there, working, defeating every modification he tried to insinuate with his own will.

Attempting to sink inward and explore this fundamental, shaping force which kept him hovering in specifics of geometry and duration he felt it, a positive entity, elude his attempts to palpate it with comprehension. Yet a black slime of skin had crawled over his interface with the rest of being, entangling him with such filters between himself and fellow-pilgrim temporals that no communication between him and them could pass without the taint of its editing. In the past such limits had been taken for granted; but here, for the first time, he knew that he continued a contest with a nameable being which had been underway for further than his memory allowed.

The shape he was given then was subject to a licking and nibbling which breached its barriers without violating the integrity of the pattern imposed by that smooth unceasing current which lifted him, like a balloon, from the wellsprings of existence. He began to fragment, to shrink, subject to hammering from all sides, and pieces were beaten off and carried away to confront their own ends and mysteries. But the utmost rivings left unexposed a nucleus epitometic of calmness and confidence, to which alone he could refer without yielding to the earmark of the alien. (He had renounced his memories, as was necessary, and did not seek an analogy though he knew one was there.)

Eventually the whole museum of colours and warmths which had been collected in his form were abstracted, rotated, and reassembled in a long-drawn kaleidoscopic shift, convened in a jellyish vagueness malleable to the crudest and rawest pressures of the world. But this structure, rather than giving way to the fingerings of hard seas of wind, stone, and water, drew in from these adversaries special flickers and resistances to swell and strengthen itself. Again, there was the brief shaft of awareness --- even these, from the alien, exterior sources, were drawn into place with magnetic exactitude by that underlying moulder, that same quiet, insistent current which sucked as well as blew within him, kept a shape upon him, swerved it to its will. Again, it shut off his groping toward it.

Nodules of colour penetrated his knowing now in three beams, diffracted into ripples. A gluey sun unveiled itself at the apex of a cornucopia of green, purple, gold, and scarlet toffees which cascaded down through sugary mists. Template hungers came jutting up hard-edged to meet them; the world sealed itself off in a protean gallery of idols. The outermost of his three ports on the imagescape pondered their vastnesses, their angularities; but the central one... there was a new dimension to his consciousness, and it showed him on each of these polychrome individualities a brutal geometric annex --- which if visible would have been a black fibrous pelt, like a gum adhering to familiar objects in unexpected places --- lurking in all the crenels and arabesques of the most ordinary world-forms he was congregated among, propped them even into their familiar interactions, their keynote

patterns.

There it was. In all bodies everywhere, a soot laid down by the blazing of that tantalian all-consuming fire. Himself, a languid swimmer in a transparent tide which nourished darknesses and dawns, capable of transformations which would render him more complex and powerful, would enthrone him ultimately on the pinnacle of purpose, saw in those strictures of surface the defeat of every urge toward perfection which struggled inside the mounting bodies. Merely by outpicturing the forces at large in the savage jungle of the universe's light he could prophesy the pantheons to come; it was not necessary now to witness. He withdrew his awareness from the undulant form he had taken, and from the unfailing breath at its base which kept it modelled and transmuting.

To facilitate his disembarkation from the questing flotsam, the inner concentrate of his mind fixed itself upon the inactive, the unchangeable, the state least subject to the minor gravities of time. Having, as he thought, opened the avenue he flung himself headlong into it, closing off all sensory channels from the last body; but in a momentary loss of balance among the elements he tried to juggle he was swept into a whirlpool of vehemence and spat back into the chill of condensation in which those aloof, unreactive engrams were more firmly incarnated. There was here no suggestion of that subtle internal blowpipe--- he was diffused in veins and clumps of the glittering plumb, spread across space and time, made of it not objectively but subjectively, its crystal edges and joints the weaknesses of his own mentation --- but despite his awareness that he had escaped the shaper he knew no victory; there was a horror here not of shape but of field, of potential; the stuff was like a sponge which drew and housed the worst and most imperious capacities of the animal creation --- the most catalytic of human avidity and brutality, the most finely interwoven into all the dioramas where selves and bodies ground over other selves and bodies to mutual extinction. Nor was the stuff, the sweat of wilful stars, a placid mirror of monstrosity; its ponderous pendulum swung ever closer to transmogrification into new spaces, where it would tumesce into more potent and undeniable nebulae of horror. A yellow pus, cooked in infernal kettles for the baiting of lurkers, accessible only in the clouds of mind... nothing had been left free. Even in this the shaper had found an outlet for its lust.

Through these devious sensations came suddenly a hurricane of hideous fire, and the subterranean passages of the heaving earth filled up with sharp-pointed debris. The whole compass of the heavens pushed down, its star-motors surging in glee, scraping all the worth that men had gathered into eyeless oblivion, to the alternate spaces where it would bloom so insanely... though it lasted only an instant, he felt he saw the whole history of the stellar cosmos, passed in its essential, going into the depths. The termite-riddled world around him would come down now at the flick of a finger.

But with the passing of the rest his own goldness fell away from him, and with its weak lines and disquieting precipitate removed from his consciousness he remained austere. There was a small satisfaction in realising he had not been trapped by the holocaust, and at once he felt a surge of the flood of peace, happiness, and fulfillment that he had been led to expect at the further side of a lifelong career of compassion and meditation, the serenity and ecstasy of entering the common ground of all beings --- a brilliance in which the cosmic meanings, the continuities which transcend question and answer, beginning and end, came suddenly into the full iris of perception. Almost --- for a long, teetering second --- David opened himself up to this beckoning paradise --- vaguely aware that it had been reached unearned, could not but be illusion --- and even then was dislodged from his perilous indecision, not by a firm grasp of his own mind, but by the sudden arrival of the same slimy sensation he had known, that something still maintained this switchboard of concepts, flounced them into pattern, was with him, insistent, unseen, welded the parts of his corporate self, which would be involved with him even if he were to penetrate that ultimate goal --- waiting, like a toad for the passing of a fly, for his first footstep across the threshold --- so that it could infect eternity.

He fought the thought, fought himself, eluded all the crowding promises, the impressions. He was enough awake to know himself at the very edge of destruction --- in the mummification of matter and time. As he had wondered, in one of his trivial existences, why simple, peaceful people, desiring nothing in the world but their own quiet, were not allowed to continue harmless lives to their end but must rather be attacked, tortured, engulfed, destroyed --- he saw now this massive horror which lay across the whole cosmic creation, increased its suffering geometrically, by making itself a part of suffering as well as torturer, and of regret, and of wonder.

What impulse had moved men to horror-powers over their own kind? Where was it born and how did it creep like a mould through the fabric of the whole universe? What defence among those desiring only placidity and peace---what glove to counter the great hammering fist that comes out of space-time to defeat all the efforts of the living universe to purify itself? --- What keeps it drumming to stir this flux, maintain its chaos, its conflicts, its horrors --- where is the answer and what the solution?

His mind was being gravetted into certain conclusions more and more alien to the thoughts he had obtruded into most of his bodies, and he fought them, too, scattershot, realising that even his thoughts were warping into another mould; they came to what flailed of him vaguely now like a voice, an exterior monologue.

"You think to take in your hands or put beneath your blade the bones of time or the throat of light? Can you see either, except from a mortal's flesh-summered face?

"Light is the blood of time, and the feeding of light, the strengthening of time, is the destiny of life... as life multiplies so does time's span lengthen... the stars must live, red tentacles enmesh, lash, nip those petrified planets... so young, so powerful... each sting injects so much venom into waiting vessels, jesses them to their proper fate... without that measure soaking into time's apes, battle-driven since they rose up... there would be escape into pastures out of time... and end to burning...

"Star-devils whose tentacles entwine and burn every world which falls below them know ... where one fails another bursts to go... when one grows old and its violences wane... the others burn the brighter, pour into the vessels the thistles of their plasm... the way out is the death of light and power, the thimbles of entity... so time breeds new stars, new worlds, new lives... the yellow rule... makes sweetness and slime... time breeds lives to urge...

"Wherever star-spokes intersect... in their various measures... those types, those primal beings, condense around the points, shaped and bred by them... so that each nucleus... each variant measure of the star-fluid beams.. produces its bouquet of creatures and responses ... each different aggregate of distances... you can not make it... none of you... there will be more grubbing... more feeding... more breeding... more disruption of shape by shape ... more subjugation of will by will... tearing, recombining ... whole world and life... ever more... bound down to light... build up from light... will be... more light! more light!"

And what was in David, realising that deception could parade every truth existent before him unrecognised, struggled against what he knew had become virtually his own brain and memories --- struggled away to that familiar

world and body where he could identify one as his own, crying out, "But --- it's not that fulminating blood-titan at all! the change-eater --- the shaper --- "

As he exerted himself back into the body he had left he struggled to open his eyes and in doing so found that only one responded --- opened and gave him view of a broad tiled room with scarps of stone projecting from the floor, lit by a massive chandelier, with open windows and French doors beyond --- and two bodies standing mid-way to him, looking at him --- one of them unquestionably his own. Groggily he heard John yell just as he felt himself quicksanded in horror deeper than the pits he had skimmed across, and felt a vertigo beyond the mechanics of his mind or body --- and saw the flesh of that face he recognised begin to melt and flow, to drool away from his eyes, with the warmth of bursting arteries he knew he could feel. Clamping strength back into himself, he controlled his fear and with the thought: *if it is true, it is still irrelevant, blunted* --- restored the boundaries of his body-consciousness.

He still looked from a single eye, though, and his face, which had begun to soften and slide, had hardened back into shape as it was caught --- a sagging goitre now, a life-long disfigurement. Only the right eye still served him.

It had, in fact, made a largely successful effort to twin the face opposite him now, from which he had, moments earlier, stared and lost.

IV

The room was lofty, and wide windows let in saffron moonlight and the ambergris perfume of blossoming shrubs. Under the light, perhaps fifteen feet away, was a massive stone chair, where sat a thing which woke more emotions in him than he had known he had. He summarily squashed them all.

Because it was dressed in an ordinary grey suit of outmoded fashion, very much soiled, the first impact was of grotesquerie. The loose, flaccid limbs were sprawled at unserviceable angles, incapable of coordinated movement; but where they lolled the stone itself was indented like a cushion. The body's bulk seemed to be so massive as to draw not just his gaze and fears, but his very flesh; everything tended toward it, slowed in its ambit --- even pirouettes of shadow in the air. The net effect was ponderous as an Olmec head. A granite heart could not beat inside.

Clots of blood and flesh still glistened, still everted, on the smashed head. David thought of that inane disavowal --- "I wear no mask" -- as if a head so fractured and cleft could possibly be schemed by artifice. Only then did he realise that the face was unexpectedly bare. In the past few years he had had horrible and depressing dreams of reaching up to peel off the face which was his own, and finding another waiting underneath it, sneering at him, full of the horrors his own eschewed --- and then still another beneath when it in turn was pared away; he thought he had finally solved it, but had to wonder now whether the literal reading were not the true one.

The eyes were open but without sign of life, no more the glaze or gelidity of death. The jaw yawned brokenly, and the live sight of red moisture testified to the mouth and throat's remaining current and operable. But there was no hint of respiration, no quiver or susurrus. It had as much indifference to the welfare of the cosmos as David himself, but its aspect stifled him. Even had the limbs not been shattered that body had none of the canonicity of mortals, and David's fear of the comparisons he would have to make dwindled to nothing.

He questioned whether to inspect the crapulous organs in the phantom-ray camera of his eyeballs, and answered that to fail to do so was to grant fear a command of him; closing his eyes, saw in the tourmaline glitter of evil its outline more clearly than in the flesh, already familiar to him as a face he had dealt with a long time that night, altered so curiously that he had to unlid his eyes at once, wondering which would be more damaged if he continued to admit that image: his retina or his brain. It embraced his perceptions with the power of a polar magnet; feeling as if the walls and floor of a familiar room had fallen away, and sentient smoke rose himalayan from a red-lacquered abyss, overtowering not only him but the earth itself, David teetered on the verge again of surrendering all his components to a tumescing ooze.

At least, he thought, it accounts for its being bare-faced...

"In a rustle of flame a yellow mask vanished from the face at the moment I saw you looking from his eyes," a calm voice behind him said, restoring him. "The word out of space and time?"

"The word... seems to be triumph for space and time."

"Hm. We will put it to the test at once." With a grating John slid the box across the floor to within a short distance of the slumping body. Somehow in the sequence of his movements David read that the two of them had just entered this fateful chamber, arriving at a normal walk.

The box was embossed with churriguesesque symbols and crests which had here the offhand, ridiculous look of ruffles and lace. He opened it by a hidden catch. It contained only heavy pins, of a metal so black it took no glint at all from the chandelier, like short syringes, sharp and hollow at one end, flaring at the other to a low-relief mask, or face-like design developed around the mouth made of the aperture, each distinct, individual--- a human face.

David saw John's own face now clearly for the first time, and for some urgent reason could not go on looking at it; even the horrible inanition of the corpse-face was preferable. But it was not repulsion that swerved him: the ages and hollows in John's face, despite the thick black hair, the specificity of the features, overwhelmed him with a burden, an excess, of all the poverties and hopes of humankind, the weariness of despair and infinite, unrequited labour.

With a handful of black pins he stood up and faced the body.

"Now that your memory is so rudely refreshed--- do you recall any physical breach older than these death-fractures?"

Tingling with the bizarrerie of the thought, David said finally, "Yes... a scar under the left arm, over the ribs... an old gash which became infected." The left arm was angled close to the body, the scar concealed. "Do you think we could prize it up with a crowbar?"

"Most unlikely; my strength is merely human. Think again."

"Mm... I don't think there's anything else but the vaccination scars... "

"As long as it was a premortal breach incorporated into the body-field by healing, it will serve," he said, and ripped the clothing from the shoulders, making no effect to avoid contact with the stony flesh. The untidy scars of several primitive vaccinations leered up at him, and he plunged a pinpoint into one margin, continued to ring it with them, each pin driven with effort, as if through a leather integument. But when the first three were in the others went more easily, finally as slickly as if into ordinary flesh.

"The blood in that body has been coagulated thirty-two years, you know," David said doubtfully, but John continued, massing them together beyond the limits of the scars, and David began passing him others from the box.

"Yes..." John said as he worked, "the old man --- the old Safed rabbi --- was right again... there is a metal of superior lightness from stars which never ignite into heat, and the question was recovering it; but all the prodigies, the thaumaturgies, of the universe sometime come to rest on the earth, somewhere ... that was my first mission. And after that, he worked it over according to his wisdom, drawing when it was possible on the features, the names, the memories of those who had gone before into the beast... and sent me off with this. Centuries of learning like a great hard shaft to joust millennia concentrated into fire... "

"You have been wandering a very long time, then, John."

"As long as --- you've lived... "

David felt more than John's prohibition working to suppress his questions.

"It sits beyond the reach of starlight here; does that fail to power it?"

"As long as starlight erupts, it is sufficient."

"Even in total darkness?"

"A darkness you could not locate nor conceive."

"Is there somehow something in common between these two bodies which compels it? Does some kin animation print in its substance anything to outlast its time? Any residuum of the compassion which once moved it, modified it?"

"There is some constraint, well enough... but it can't be what you still possess. You really don't want to think that between flesh and person is some real, instead of incidental, tie, do you? To carry an albatross of bodies like worn-out cashboxes around your neck?"

"I can't see that, if not even this body can be pronounced dead."

"You made that mistake once before."

As he said it David thought the tongue wobbled in a lubricant of old blood, then remembered the fires through which its magmatic thoughts had bored to him. He wondered how this foreign body might have changed had it lived through the intervening years; beyond its many mutilations, it had the aspect with which death had labelled it. He tried to empathise with those wounds, but they meant nothing to him now, were the scoriae of the moon; nor was there any recognition of its other individualities --- the trim of the hair, cut of the nails, scars and warts just visible at the neck and wrists --- nothing to tie him, to fight off the sense of utter severance, malignity. He had only to close his eyes to observe a surging nucleus of power somehow compressed to human size, like the light-recluse masses of deep space, prevented possibly from sinking into the earth only by a column of solid iron propped all the way from the central stew of ores.

All his other faculties told him that he stood beside a mountain of explosive with its fuse a split-second's hiss away, to which the house, the plateau, the planet were only temporary dens. To avoid the most fundamental risk to himself he tried to join it to his sensory perceptions, to make the whole thing complete and congruous on his body's plane.

While they spoke John had continued to fix the heavy body with the black pins. Once the wounds were covered he spread out to the head, blacked the shoulders and arms, crossed the torso--- without attempting to reach any of the body which was in contact with the stone --- and down the legs, crowding the punctures everywhere because there were so many pins, until the body's own features were concealed under small black superfaces.

John stepped back, drawing David. "Don't get close. I don't know entirely how it may happen." They went on to the window and stood outlined to the night.

David checked the image quickly with his closed eyes and found only that the abortive organs might have been a little less marked. Opening them again, he saw the black surface changing colour; a paleness entered; it was turning pink. Then a few glistening drops condensed at the mouths of several pins; a red sweat formed over the multifaced sheath; widened, globulated, and fell, each drop from each of the hundreds of mouths, the mouths communicating, through the long hollows of the syringes, with the cold dead flesh of the carcass. Thinking of his own bloody sweat --- as his eyes took it --- David "looked" again, saw nothing changed--- pronounced it *in sanguinem veritas*.

But these were followed: droplets became strings of beads, a chain a flow; the red dripping became a red rilling, a spouting, gouting, gulfing --- blood, red blood, flowing in high-pitched streams in every direction, converting the human simulacrum to a fountain of ruby jets, a nozzle of scarlet powers.

There were rustles and disturbances outside. When David turned his head to look out he faced back at once, determined to look no more. The amount of liquid already shooting from that smashed body now exceeded possibility, and a huge pool widened on the floor. Immediately it began flowing out through the doors most of the outer sounds ceased. As if in brief protest, little tentacles flew up from it at times, dissolving as fast; shapes and reflections, like far-off tableaux, sketched in pointillistic twinkles, came and went as fast. The substance itself was not abnormal, only its volume.

"They tell me there is a cave beneath this house; is it big enough to drain away this infinity of blood?"

"However much blood it has drained it will still have room. It is in a cave of ages that this blood has spent its time --- in the mud of gold --- not the kind you offer Mammon --- in the silver --- "

"Holding light hostage down there among the blindfish?"

"Don't denigrate the blindfish; you might recognise one. This is the cave we're in--- to free the darkness held hostage by the heat."

David stopped trying to unite the conflicts in his mind and watched uninvolved as the viscous lake absorbed his vision and his concepts. Here the disguised redness of the heavens was fleshed out, but loose, diffusion into a baser fabric; there was a sullen glow now in the gushing field which died only as it splashed the earth. Pyrotechnic illusions shot up and circled the cadaver itself, red veins aurora-like reflected from the white-washed walls though invisible in the space they should have occupied; and to the pattering was added the hiss of volcanic fever.

Laving the ground, the roots, the mountains' buttocks outside, cascading to pollute or fulfil every stream and runnel in that aleatory land, it went on to fill horrible hours, steadfastly watched by an unflinching John and an ever more restless David (who felt some sense of liberation from the superhuman detachment which had won him back to his cicatrised body) until finally it began to dwindle, trickled, reverted to droppings, drops, sweat, and then --- so it seemed --- ended; until a sudden last spasm erupted --- a forceful outburst of the darkest fluid, turning into a spout of crimson fire, so that both men ducked, hid their faces --- which stopped none of its penetration to their hidden retinas --- and then, as abruptly, nothing --- the leach of colour from air and body. Puffed at first as if to follow that outburst with flesh, it sank, slithered out of the chair to the floor, and so collapsed into fragments.

"Thus the blood," David said, dazed, "was also the strength, the will, the comprehension --- any of the more essential elements of his victims also drained and bottled up, as the torturer proclaimed --- remaining to be faced in a massive flood?"

"The chance alone of that," John said with a catch in his voice, "is a horror even I could not face. Let's settle for the squid's smokescreen. And believe a measure of beauty and even freedom may have returned to us." In his voice was knowledge of an eonian horror even he could not describe this night.

The sea of blood tossed thinly around them, continued to drain through the doors, seeking a level somewhere in earth or fire. There had been a brief puff of decay when the body had first fallen, but as they picked through its fragments for the pins they found all orts of flesh charred on the inner edges.

"Is this really necessary? Do you expect ever to have to do such a thing again?"

"Of course it may happen again --- but I'm not leaving these weapons on the scene of the enemy's fall... Yes, at this moment it may be taking body in some innocent child in a mountain village... worming down through the thoughts of a delver... falling in its rays on those unholy rituals men always resort to for some personal triviality, the petulance of ego, and as a result waking sickness in the whole earth... and hordes of innocent lives again go down under the scythe of its being. But then tomorrow some shaman in the Andes may chance upon the secret of Safed's last rabbi. It's always the same story."

Only part of the liquefying corpse was left, sloughing off hair and skin all the more rapidly; the pins carried foul detritus with them into the box.

"Then this great lancing does not weaken it for a time or a space?"

"The flow has its limits... it can't rebound and snuff out the light of that horrible star, nor can all the earth's oceans, nor the sum of darkness between the two... look how little of its volume we have syphoned. Yet this was drawn down with great power... and outweighs many many efforts."

"Surely this one body can't counterbalance the other thirty-six ---"

"Why not? A single eye could do it. A brain-point. I'm afraid there are more bodies than this holding down the dark end of the scale. And the thirty-six counterweights have their own problems --- call them their buoyancies ---"

"But this mass was exactly thirty-six times the living body --- doesn't that mean something?"

"What is the first Law of Coincidence?"

"But if we fought starfire in a blood-bloated corpse --- been battling that bulk of red fire all through a mode --- the malignancies in the visible spectrum can hit us in the eye, their x-rays can hit us in the genes, and I suppose their micropulsations can hit us in the brain-cells --- why tolerate so trifling a scuffle if it could deal us so effortless a death-blow?"

"You ask human questions. They move in a different time-frame, and these at least can't violate continuity. There are laws there --- or an anangke --- that are our only hope."

"However they may hail their vitriolic rays at us it takes some human time to rearrange parts of our body, and however their micropulses come darting for us it takes more human time to rearrange parts of our minds. The stately gyrations of the galaxies, resorting their powers and imagings, work like a brain too, a compound more than the sum of its parts, but it takes a whole biological age to carry through... so we've got the hard abutments of time and the choppy moats of distance to hide behind, use the enemy's anatomy against himself... at any given time. Where we get all the vampiric thirst of the Follower in one breachable body, we may get all the saturnian soul-hunger of *his* ruler in another. Because so many thoughts are the body's weanlings. If it shapes the rapids of the red giants or the molecules of venom it is only to have them ready to answer his commands. But eventually the short-cut through bodies will pale, and it will have to deal more directly... yet less specifically... and perhaps by then... "

"Yet it's as much a tool as we... I've felt ... the essence of the beast is in everything ... even in the sensations of departure from the universe."

"So at least you are desired to think."

"I found it everywhere."

"Exactly. Irony of the mask: it fits the masquer. Though the face swells beneath to match its garment, you are persuaded that it bars your eyes. Those of a domino are empty. Light passes through them unedited: the black swathing of the face absorbs it all --- is alone Samael, the god of blindness --- himself at no loss for perception! You see as well --- or as poorly --- from either side.

"Your eyes sweep so many laminae of surface to your brain: your ears daub in their pulses and vibrations, and you think to have measured their spaces and their time. Then your nose lifts on them the shadows of umbilical mists; the dozen beacons of your skin may precipitate on those spectral platitudes a topography of minute initials. But there are as many sensors in the brain, as many muscles of memory and judgment, to act as chisels or as templates and tease the complex into its total shape. Ignorance is dangerously procrustean. Where the fragile membranes of the mind are not capacious enough to admit the new angles it will strain and tear, or else the fabric will stretch to do it harbergage at less immediate injury to itself. Thus the shape it assumes and holds is little related to any one of those qualities any one of your narrow pathways has brought into your interior; an electric geometry, fed and murtured from then on by the stuff your body calls its life, encased in that puree of pulp, fire, and pure cognition where you *really* live.

"Understand now why that strip of 'real' visions which kept pushing into your eyes whenever you dodged back to look through them was the real mask of obscurity, the mask which had to be taken off? The real battles were among the ultimate personae --- those jewel-like micro-stars embedded in the red heat of your ganglia and free in a thousand alien demesnes --- the things you always imagined as impulses and emotions, which the seers have always personified, are themselves wardrobes of very real entities, as are things which may even lack one or another mode of the fragments portioned out to the channels which pass them through to you --- the eyes, for instance, may have to go begging at times ---; all those shapes fit and move in a galactic epic of their own within your being, some to match, anastomose, and unite with the invaders --- fused, to be transformed still again, almost like a long cycle of enzymes.

"Just as the reading of a line flourishes in you a fan of shapes and colours recalled from life or spun from ready threads, these images once stitched into wholeness precipitate trains of associate beings in all dimensions, imperialise into greater and intenser entities, perhaps incorporating into themselves as they swell and conquer some of those very glowing seeds, in their fulness, which you had already leagued with you --- thereby drawing in a flaw, the germ of their own destruction. That's where your power is! The value of a whole code of life --- to brood such entities to maturity!

"The power of horror is simple: it opens your eyes. Now you learned to close them."

"And could have melted the rest of my body from my bones --- "

"And with the loss of that mask, David, you would have been formidable indeed. You have survived more than you know."

"But then where --- back there --- when was it planned --- not just in Fleischhacker's mind to go to Tibet, after some insignificant symbol --- but when in his body, his ancestry, was that propensity first planted --- that bond first linked with this fiery lord --- that resulted so many millennia later in one man's voyaging so far, so readily, opening a whole world to the sucking breath of the beast --- the monster of the red star?"

"Or when your Dr. Vulliamy's destiny determined to send his soul on one errand and his body on another? Could have been at a point in the egg of a reptile, the fissioning of a parvancorina. I suppose there is some kind of purpose or satisfaction in answering such questions, a koan or set of koans, but if you never find the answers nothing in the course of destiny will change. Ouroboros still tempts, will to the end of his tail. If you dissected the universe piece by piece, quark by quark, you might disentangle all its courses --- but

you would find so many seeds of horrors there, like the spores of a fungus, that you would --- barring the ultimate power --- incubate more to fruition than you could smash. Nor could you see the whole as more than a point. That's why the search is pointless ... something you haven't learned and I... haven't yet accepted.

"No, believe the author of that national epic of your adopted people: 'The universe is finished; the copestone is on, and the chips were carted off a billion years ago... it's too late to make any improvements.'"

"You haven't accepted, I haven't learned... that there are two aspects to compassion? That of those who guide men on a pathway out of the horror bearing down on them... and that of those who battle, derail the onriding horror, give the hapless time to get away... it has to be one or the other."

"The simplest acts and attitudes have consequences beyond the body; and our survival here is an example, yes --- that's not meaningless. Your face alone is a parable of success."

"From Fleischhacker to the red star to --- what else now?"

"A quiet dawn --- to deceive your trepidation."

Once David was fairly steady they left the house. The carrion and its cape of salty jelly were disarmed, vacuous. John swung the steel skewer and its freight carelessly into a tree and left it dangling, but it hung limp.

"It wasn't the metal," he said, going on, "but the recognition, that gave us the edge..."

"Was it experience that led you to expect it that way?"

"It's all written down in a well-known old book, that anyone can read."

There was no minatory spirit around them now. The shapes they saw in the earth and trees were strange, but flaccid, expired. Somewhere else, David knew in his heart, a body suddenly invertebrate had sprawled and stiffened. He restrained the compulsion to touch his harrowed face, understanding what it was he had instinctively shunned in John's face: it was not John's flesh and blood which had loosened and flowed on the pathway to explosion, but his innermost stuff, substance of soul and will, dream and memory, which had been touched by a thrust of naked cosmic horror, and which had fumbled and been left cicatrised. While in a few years David would pass beyond these variable concerns, John would carry them, face them, elude and strike again at them... for ever, as men used the word.

He looked toward the stars, frozen unflickering in the firmament, and felt no hail of diabolisms. The first tincture of day had seeped into the horizon; the ancients had not worshipped the sun altogether in vain.

They found Jacinto's body floating in a red eddy in the main drive as they headed for the gate. He had not been struck down by any of the now-impotent guardians, but the turgidly settling blood circulated everything. His eyes were still aglow, and his lips moved steadily in cyclic liturgy despite the barrenness of tongue within. Unfirmed by sound, the words were legible to sight... "blessed that I am for the trust of your secret, the glory of which exceeds utterance... " Yet his eyes had all the feeling which a man might expect who had seen his faiths and virtues pulled out of him like nerves.

David dropped to feel his chest; John, without a glance, asked for his knife and lifted Jacinto's arm, where the bizarre sign smouldered in an icy brand once more black.

Unable to find a heartbeat, though the body still simmered, David passed it over; and John skinned the hieroglyphed patch from his arm. At once the body went limp and chilled under David's fingertips.

"That simple dance of lines was all that kept him alive?"

"'That simple dance of lines' was what killed him. Once he was marked, the quantum called Jacinto Zel was gone."

"By a random flourish --- "

"Like a 'random' encounter? You know how to construct a four-dimensional figure from the cartouches you find in rocks; surely you can imagine how some can flesh out a thirty-six-faceted being from a slice of two."

David pulled the rock chip from his pocket and stared at it hoping some resemblance would rise into focus. Like great gluey bands, crissing the whole universe, the signs were there for one who could see.

"There *is* a constraint --- a bond, then---"

"But not one-way, remember... any more than that gift, that advantage, he chose to give you that night in Szechwan, to augment his own success, failed to stab him... in the end."

He had cut saplings and bound up a litter; they took up Jacinto's body. Thinking of the family which still had to be told --- which would never understand this cruelty, this sacrifice, though cruelty was the mainstream of their small compass --- they rose and turned; Jacinto too had gone through the same burning odyssey, come face to face with the ocean of the unutterable, the trench of the gloating --- out of the simplest of human needs.

As they faced east again David's remaining eye fell on a pool full of shining blossoms, on a waterlily that stood apart from the others. In its simple white rosette was the essence of all shapes, all continuities; he fell in orbit with it, enraptured, sensing, not the beauty or wonder inherent in a simple waxen organ of generation, but the beauty and wonder inherent everywhere, in the heart of his thoughts, reflected to him from the surface of that flower --- kindling in him, as it had in others, a conviction of timelessness and peace --- and awakening him to the fact that he had lived the wholeness of life from one end of space and change to the other, that all was distilled and dwarfed in the magical purity of this beauty beyond causes and answers....   and left off all further cavils and queries of the poisonous light.

A Cobweb of Pulsing Veins

1

Leaving the horses mulched in the cimmerian shadow of a bloated yew, I eased pick and shovel out of the wagon and waded through the sodden yellow banks of weeds to a breach in the corpse-kingdom's crumbling stone barricade. A quarter-moon smeared a feverish glow on the marble slabs and dappled the trodden weeds that beleaguered them with a pale dewy leprosy; only the massy shadows which clustered around the trunks of the ancient oaks and beeches escaped its infection, and I crept into them. But there, where the fallen leaves had not received a dayful of cold rain, cracklings like the meshing of brittle teeth followed my steps.

I paused and glanced around cautiously. I have many brothers I never care to meet: ours is a sacrosanct, but acroamatic, calling. The sodden quietness of this night might tempt them, but that expanded watchfulness which pulses beneath my temples convinced me I was alone. Sliding in between thickly interwoven branches of fir and ilex, I crouched between the adjoining walls of two ancient and weather-worn mausolea and lit a small candle to peer at the curious diagram I bore.

He who had given it, had sketched it from memory for me, familiar with every molehill of this graveyard. Yet so exact were its proportions and juxtapositions that I was startled to be shown this familiar ground in his firm lines as though seen from a height. Despite the ease with which I could have obtained access to the tomb, he indicated he had specified a precise and peculiar path of entry, and on my obedience was his compensation staked. Thus--- the more as the northeast corner, my goal, was the most unkempt and deserted sector of this cemetery, whose harvest, to winnowers of my mode, was scantiest, and as the landmarks he offered were for the most part known to me, however well, in strangely different verbal dress--- I referred carefully once more to his precise distortion, as if dowsing my heartbeat on the right side.

I moved on, rounding the sunken grave of William Mattix (every apprenticeship leaves its scars), the sepulchre become shrine of the poet, Joseph Ray, its bird-indexed statue angled against the heavy door. The complexity of that door's lock, the thickness of the walls, and the costly iron of the casket, had all been in vain, but his image was projected in there still by the worshipful eyes of fame's pale imbibers--- surely a moral there for those who scorn us. Thorn-bushes and dense new growths of weeds only slowed my passage through the little city of mausolea which housed the whole line of the Brilliots, but I was careful to tread directly upon that unmarked mound which had been concealed half a century before by the planting of great rosebushes, all of which had dwindled to sickly sticks.

Most of the alleys beyond that I had never trod before. An occasional flagstone gleamed through the turf, and many of the houses and vaults were covered, not by lichens, but by tufts of dangling grass and more. Once I was among them, they seemed so uniformly disguised in the thick parget of earth, I could not be sure which was which; I was at sea in an anonymity of dying pride, already absorbed in the earth's time-tolerant revision.

The door of one mausoleum was long broken, swung so far inward that it was pinioned by a gout of earth to the wall behind. Spiders alone maintained its interdiction. I stepped within to scan the diagram once more. The stagnant atmosphere which dropped on me as I entered was shocking; fear is a syllable of child's babble to those of us who cull our living from the dead, except when it faces us astride warm breath.

When my flaring candle began to zebra the stones, I looked first at the depth of the tomb, paper-blank as my fingers. It was huge: I had not noticed from outside because the further reaches were entirely buried, earth dribbling in between the joints of the stones. The hard shelves of marble near me at the door were empty, and those at the limits of the light disdained their granite seals, were in places filled with rock. Earth had filled the tomb everywhere, and fungi - mocking grass carpeted its floor.

Remembering suddenly that this was a particular of the edifice I sought, I glanced at the paper, and found myself confirmed. For some reason this brought a shock. I snuffed the candle automatically as if in fear of detection, chilled more than autumn night should chill me in any palace of frozen tears.

But imagination and resurrection cannot stand face to face. I hung my heavy coat across the gaping door, and having excised the feeble light of the living, lit the lantern, leaving it low.

The coffins at the rear of the tomb seemed to have reposed undisturbed, towering to the ribbed ceiling, for the fungi loam was crusted evenly over them. At the back was a wall of stone of waist height, beyond which was an equal quantity of loam. In the terminal wall of the mausoleum, closing down on its far side, the stonework ceased altogether, the dirt being contiguous with the outside. As for the embrasure of the consecrated walls, there was room for perhaps a dozen coffins, though there were no stones to mark any. But there I had to dig.

Bizarre shadows leapt from behind the crowded coffins and retreated before the swinging light. A perspiration too profuse to be that only of confined sepulchres swivelled across my hands and forehead. Yet to such labours I settled as a butcher to his block, or a miller to his wheel, with the fresh slough of dawn sweet on their cheeks.

I had been assured that there were only two coffins in this elevated parterre. The one I sought lay furthest from the outer half-wall, against the inner, and between five and seven feet from the right-hand wall. I had not laughed when he had given these figures, knowing that what he sought in such cramped confines could be no orb of bones but rather some bracketed chest, for in stately days such as those which had filled this chamber with their excreta, no dog, however beloved, shared its family's tomb.

I vaulted over the earth, forced to squat against the roof. With mingled feelings, I felt my feet sink ankle-deep into the moist humus, stopping only by virtue of their reaching the other coffin. Only a thin sheet of mud kept it within the rightful matrix of death.

According to his directions, I probed the soil beyond and heard the muffled clank of metal. The usual precautions being nugatory in so ancient and unvisited a tomb, I merely began shovelling the intervening soil at hazard and bared a small object in a few minutes' time. I realised then that I had not been adequately warned; for what I had uncovered was not a treasure-box, but merely the upper (or lower) end of a coffin which stood erect in its grave. Nor was it of normal size, but only a little more than two feet square.

Here was added work. I decided finally that by opening up only one side I could haul it out laterally in little more time than it would take to section a normal grave. But as I exposed it level by level, strange aspects caught my eye and slowed my arms, and the same disquietude of my reception huddled closely at my back. The coffin was of iron and ornamented with small brass carvings of unusual intricacy; but chains of tarnished gold secured the lid to the base. Moving inadvertently between the lantern and the casket, I thought there was phosphorescence in the latter, and was able to make out the brazen decorations quite distinctly. It was only four feet in length, so I finished and pulled it forward in less time than I had set.

The weight was thunderous. Allowing for the cumbersome metals of its make, it yet overbalanced the death-cradles of the obese. It was all I could do to gouge it across the spongy earth, baring the other coffin in the process. It was likewise of iron. As I lifted one end of the metal box over the edge of the retaining wall, I caught a hissing noise, or escaping air. But my full attention eliminated it. Something, still, seemed aprowl in the lifeless crypt, and with sudden strength I eased the ponderous object well up the passageway. As the lantern was continually being obscured in these operations, I believed there was a phosphorescence in many of the surrounding boxes; foolishly, I was disinclined to extinguish my lantern to ascertain whether its reflections might not be the source of the glow.

I had already realised I would never be able to get the box across the graveyard, and that it would be necessary to drive the horses around to the gravel walk which passed that side of the cemetery nearest the tomb--- only fifty feet distant. Lest the long pause of the mares by the outer wall attract attention of the possible passerby, I would move the coffin to the wall first. Easier planned than executed. I was a long time forcing the iron cast even to the mouth of the tomb, where I extinguished my lantern and put on my coat, already crudely chilled. In the course of manuevers, I made out with some surprise a small Byzantine cross above the door, half-hidden by hanging weeds.

Then I remembered I had forgotten my tools. Leaving the box only a few feet from the door, I hurried back inside. Despite the depth and shadowing of the moon, every structure inside the sepulchre was clear and distinct to my eyes! I took neither pause nor caution in my outward flight, hauled the casket to the protection of some whispering vines shrouding a low-slung tomb some distance from the wall. Racing across the cemetery to my patient horses, I tossed shovel and pick into the wagon, unhitched and drove them from the safety of the shadows into the most open of the cemetery's buffering fields, liberally strewn with moonlight.

In a few minutes I was on the gravel road, by then calmed sufficiently to slow the pace of the two black mares, and seal ourselves to the ancient wall in silence. I had for a minute almost thought of abandoning the undertaking, but now with surprising speed, I heaved the iron box over the wall and lowered it into the wagon. I leapt back to the top of the wall for a quick look around. From the door of the tomb I had robbed poured a flood of pulsing blue light---a brighter and more intense glow than any will-o'-the-wisp or fungus fire could kindle. Dimly I could see details of the whole tomb bathed in its cold radiance; it pulsed and flickered faintly, but confined to the tomb, and I could see no source.

My withered tongue clave to the roof of my mouth; my scalp soaked in needles; my clothes were soaking. For a moment, I was viperstruck, but the horses, pawing restlessly, sensed something more than I, and feeling the reins slack, started off. They broke into a gallop as I narrowly leapt into the wagon, and I sprawled helplessly, careening against the fateful casket as they ran. Too palsied to recover, I rolled there impotent, as they raced the star-winds, until at last instinct took them toward that pine-buttressed stable we occupied and bore me into its black and evil-smelling, and most welcome, depths.

2

The following day was grey and surly with the continuous drizzle of cold rains. Toward afternoon, a heavy fog shouldered them away, sticking to the sagging trees and blanketing the house. Waking at noon, I wandered through the rooms in a sort of panic becalmed. Cold reason was at work; I sought a thousand plausible explanations of the horror of the previous night. Unfortunately, I could not find one. He, on whose mission I had been, had promised to return late this afternoon, to claim that which I had obtained; and I was anxious for him to come and remove it. I stood at a small window steadily, peering into the seething mist.

A dark silhouette finally floated into view and turned toward the house, pausing. Without waiting, I seized a candle and ran into the stables, which were always dark. The mares stood silently, adrift in their own dreams. Pulling myself into the wagon and sweeping off the rags which concealed the box, I was struck again by a shivering and a sense of dread expectancy of which I had never thought myself capable. The dry-mouthed fears of ages had stared in my face, and I had never heeded them. I was garbed in a tattered, but once elegant, housecoat which had been rescued from the decay of the grave itself. On both hands, I wore gold rings which--- as I am no artisan--- were nothing more than the welded teeth of fools who thought to break the ancient platitude, their shapes still sharp and individual.

Clothing, jewelry, and some favored artifacts, which otherwise would have melted to mist like the loves that cemented them, had been returned to utility and normal depreciation in my house without second thought.

In the dimness of the stable, though, the box perceptibly glowed, beyond the ability of my candle to wake response--- as if filled with fire whose intensity penetrated its meteoric dermis. When I bent nearer to see whether the untouched brass carvings were not brighter than the rest, I was struck by a foetid odour entirely different from that of decay. I ran back to the window---the only one that penetrated the brown shreds of brambles that hem the house--- and looked for the gaunt figure. He was not there. It had been someone else.

The rains began again. I paced back and forth nervously. Piddling flashes of lightning preceded unexpectedly intense borborygmi in the heavens. It added to my extremity, waking horrible visions; scanning the mist again for sight of the man in black, I hurried back to the stables. Since the coffin was uncovered, it was now clearly visible in the darkness, and the mares pawed and neighed in their stalls. For their own peace of mind (whatever its cost to my own), I decided to move that spiritual millstone into the passageway.

But the glow was uncanny, the tiny carvings almost mobile, when I tried to touch it. The increased frenzy in the stalls, however, goaded me, and I grasped its startling warmth and heaved it gratingly along the sideboard, once again enduring all the sensations of the night before. Tipping it over to the floor, I found the lid was loose, and the hyperweighted box fell from my hands and swung open as it struck, the lid restrained only by the golden chains from spilling its contents. Something horribly white was visible inside, and that noxious scent which was not putrefaction slaked the air. Badly as my fingers shook, I swore suddenly to withstand it no more; I had to know what I had brought out of that thaumaturgical earth at the behest of a stranger in black. I unloosed all of the chains but one, which carried more slack than the others, and cautiously lifted the heavy lid, with an unmuffled scream. I dropped it and hurried back to my rooms, leaning on the door with all my strength until I fell to the floor in nightmare reverie.

The thing---in my brief glimpse---was indeed no larger than a small child. But it was no child. The shape approximated that of an adult man, but the body was stretched out with arms over the head, so that the membraneous folds connecting arms and legs were clearly visible, all worm-white, except for purplish webs of blood lining the folded membranes. I had seen only a fraction of the face--- if such it was --- a gaping mouth whose cobra fangs indented the lower lip, tiny eyes with the slit pupil of the cat, and expression---if such it was---diabolical beyond metaphor.

And this thing--- this thing I had dragged from a tomb untouched in over a century--- was perfectly preserved, unflawed by a nibble of decay.

When I finally regained control of myself, the rains had ceased and darkness was already mopping up black rags of shadow. The grim clouds were heavy and sooty and I knew that no moon would watch that night. In the stable, I could hear the mares whinnying desperately. As light failed by seconds, the horror grew. I searched what little of the landscape remained for the predicted form, but only the wind came to meet my eyes.

"With nightfall," I mused, "his time is done." In heavy coat and muddy boots, I went down to the stable and heaved the load back into the wagon, shrouding it as before. Was there a nimbus of blue sparks, vaguer than an aurora, around the coffin? Did a pale umbilicus stretch toward the window? I resolved to keep them faint. After all their exertions, the mares only panted when I drew them out and hitched them up, but they pulled and shivered once the wagon moved.

As never before, I cursed myself for entering such a venture, cursed my greed, cursed my whole life of such desecrations for an ungodly, unblessed profession. I cursed my blasphemy in praising myself always as an unchristened animal and an instrument of the Creed's glorious promise. Tears of remorse were actually accompanying the sweat-drops on my cheeks when the doors flew wide and we tore out into the night, the horses caroming the night-grimed fields as if all the fiends of hell were after them, instead of only one.

3

I took no thought to caution as we swept down on the cemetery. The swollen yews and saprophytic beeches threw up stygian ramparts to a sky scarcely lighter, and greeted me with the awful clenching of hollow fangs. Blackness blockaded heavens and forests, but the herbage gleamed wanly and I drove the mares into the midst of it, not caring who or what might see us, and hurried on to the gravel walk from which I would have to work.

It was only when I jerked them to a halt next to the ancient tombs that I heard the other distant hoofbeats. I was shot through with the frost of dread, but not, this time, stricken. Hitching the team to a protruding branch, I exerted myself to thrust the coffin over the wall, and followed to find that, having forgotten to fasten the chains again, the coffin had come open, and one slim, white arm with its trailing drapery of skin dangled out of the mortuary confines.

I was already scoring a deep trench in the rank ground, hauling it on, when an enormous black mount galloped up, sending my own shrieking and pawing. The same gaunt figure I had awaited so impatiently all day was astride. But he had failed me, and, events transpiring as they had, I had no further concern with him. I had turned the box to an upright position, the lid clanging shut as the soft horror tumbled inside again. I went on dragging.

"Fool!" he snarled. "Fool! What do you think you are doing?"

The only perceptible feature of his face which lay in the shadow of his wide-brimmed hat, was the glare of red eyes. In sudden recollection, I turned to look at the tomb, and saw it ablaze with the pulsing blue light of my night-mares. I stopped, helpless.

With horrible agility, the other man came over the wall. "Stop!" There was an accustomed command in his voice. "I hired you to rescue this from that tomb and rescued it will be. Here's the money--- now surrender the booty!"

He offered a jingling sack. I only stared. I wondered why, in his rage, he did not seize the thing from me, or even threaten me. Red anger and black hatred swore in his violent eyes. But I only stared.

"Graveworm! Maggot! Corpserat! Have you become so enamoured of the stink of buried flesh that you have come to despise it sweet? Is the trickling oil of rot tastier than blood? You who have blessed so many with the promised resurrection? You who have uprooted the better part of this selfsame cemetery for lust of the blush of gold, you hesitate now to liberate one more imprisoned innocent from the suffocating settle of mould--- the power of deceptive decay?

"You deny your own dreams! You defy your own destiny! I am your kindred! I too am a resurrectionist. But I aim at resurrection beyond your fondest dreams! I am your king! I shall grind the key which opens that strange aeon in which death may die! In which all maggots shall pine to extinction; all cemeteries shall become desert and desolate. The fears, powers and strengths wastefully secreted in sterile soil shall burst out like fresh shoots to a peacock-tailed spring!"

I had backed away--- to the further side of fear--- and croaked, "If you will have it, then take it."

But he stood back, straightening. "Carry it back outside the cemetery walls," swinging the leather sack gently.

I could not have touched it again for a moon of gold. Instantly the other, whose black coat was flapping around him, went into a transport of fury. He threw the sack to the ground and a dully gleaming torrent of coins spilled out. Over it he frothed, gnashed his teeth, snarled like a beast.

Then the distant drumming of hoofbeats came pattering on my ears again. Expecting to see infernal legions pour out of the darkness, their fire-breathing hounds trotting alongside, I looked to the west, wondering how long life can endure such alien trespasses; but only one lone rider appeared over the crest of the wall, slowing to a halt. The man in black glanced at him only briefly and grated to me again:

"Move that coffin back outside the walls. Body-snatcher, you know this is consecrated ground!"

From the folds of his cloak he took a heavy brass amulet, incised with tortured hieroglyphs and grisly symbols. It glowed in the darkness, and it was an unhealthy glow without illumination, like that of the coffin itself. Behind us the blue lambence, cold as Malebolge, waxed outward.

"What work of the devil goes on here?" suddenly rang out of the shadows; the newcomer was coming over the wall.

"Since when is his work yours, spawn of Ptahîl?" the other snarled. "Toil by day if you must, and leave the night for its own!"

Minatory and determined he turned to me. "Do as I have instructed before the hideous fate which must be yours---" Suddenly both himself and the coffin were enveloped in a dark purple glow, or a purpurescence of blackness. Blots of glimmer seemed to pass from the amulet to the box and a mephitic amethystine mist began to well from it. I could see in the distinct fluorescence that the symbols of the amulet complemented those fixed to the coffin. With no further chance---I was beyond thought---I heard the first feeble scratchings against the lid---from within the coffin.

The newcomer had leapt into the cemetery and was stalking toward us, the pick from my wagon in his hand. The black intensity of the glow was strengthening and I felt the last of my integrity drain through my soles when he suddenly raised the pick before him, at the face of the mourning creature.

"Demon," he shouted, "you dare to violate the ordinations of heaven? You dare to counter the judgment of God? Then make ready to join your black master!"

Beneath his faint tau, the swarming of blue beads slowed and dwindled; and when the desecrator turned toward it, an astonishing expression flitted across his misshapen features. I heard him gasp, "Consecrated ground!" and pushing the amulet back into his coat, he turned his body as if to dash for the wall, but seemed momentarily frozen. In that instant, the pick reversed and fell unerringly to the centre of his skull. Its long handle projecting forward like a bascinet, he took several convulsive steps and collapsed asprawl.

From the moment he had hidden the amulet, the violet light around the coffin had vanished, and the scratching had ceased. With sudden glaring bursts, the blue flicker from the mausoleum began to fade. The other had already bent over the fallen body and withdrawn the amulet, which he carried quickly to the far corner of the walls and buried with his hands. As it touched the earth, a small jet of blue light burst up, and then he covered it over.

"Now get this thing back into the fortress which binds it," he said harshly, returning and helping me---it was rather his strength which seemed enormous---to push and pull the weighty coffin back into the confines of its tomb and even back to its dirt receptacle, where we smoothed over the displaced dirt. As we had first entered the still blue-flickering tomb, I had seen that the locks of hair falling over my eyes, raven at sunset, were white as the moon. But once the hideous object was concealed, the glow departed wholly from the tomb and we were grasped with darkness. It was comforting and familiar.

As we groped our way out, the other upbraided me in a voice oddly hollow for one so deep, but not at all shaken. "This I hope will teach you the need for living by the laws of heaven. The lie in the garden assured the perpetual growth of such marble gardens as these for all the days of the earth, and that there may be justice among all created things, these seeds must be left to their proper harvesters. This time I will let you go, but if in the future, you forget to align your purposes with those of lawful beings, you will regret it. Come and look."

We felt our way outside and stopped by the fallen body. The clouds had thinned slightly and there was enough light to pick out revelatory points.

Only a shattered skull, pierced by the pick, emerged from clothes rotting and invested with mould. Clots and shreds of flesh and hair still clung to it, but they were verminous with decomposition. Bones similarly leeched protruded from the sleeves and trousers.

"This may not be the first, but will be the last time that he has died," he said, and with one final abjuring look from fiercely yellow eyes, he fell and began gnawing the last scraps of flesh away from the bones.